

To Call This House A Home by dragonartist5

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Summary: Mike leaves for college, and El stays in Hawkins. The long-distance thing works out, for a time, until a positive pregnancy test turns their world upside down. They'll figure it out, because that's what they always do. How hard can parenting be, really? Turns out, pretty damn hard.

1. Chapter 1

"When do classes start?" El asked, glancing at Mike. He kept his eyes fixated on the ground, hands buried in the pockets. His toe dislodged a pebble, and El watched it roll, clanging as it struck the metal side of the train tracks. They'd made it a habit—walking down the tracks, like this, when neither he nor El were busy. Which was almost never, it seemed, with both of them tied up with jobs or schoolwork. In Mike's case, a part-time gig at the Radioshack and more than a few advanced science classes. When El wasn't busy fighting her way through piles of homework assignments, she was at the police station, answering phone calls and organizing case files. Luckily, summer allowed them to spend more time together, and El and Mike weren't keen to pass up the opportunity. They stole minutes, sneaking off to his basement, or to catch a movie, or to walk the tracks. Summer had been kind to them, but all good things come to end. *And nothing gold can stay*, El thought, as she watched Mike, cascade of dark curls falling over his forehead, constellations of freckles dusting his nose and cheeks, dark irises cast away from her, so dark they were almost black.

It was early August. They'd graduated from high school the previous June, and the clock kept ticking. Ticking away the days, the hours, the minutes . . . And El mentally kicked herself for neglecting to spend more time together. She'd never taken him for granted, almost sure she'd wake up back in that lab, skeleton-arms wrapped around that patchy stuffed tiger, under those artificial lights. Sure she'd wake up in some alternate timeline, one where she hadn't escaped. One where a freckle-faced dork hadn't pulled her out of the rain and gave her a home and a name and eggs. But she had her obligations, and he had his, and now he was slipping through her fingers.

The past six months weren't without fits and jumpstarts. College was always a topic they danced around, knowing what it meant. Knowing it meant they'd have to be apart, after almost six years attached at the hip. But they couldn't ignore it forever, and so all the ugliness they kept inside came bubbling to the surface, until they were screaming at each other from opposite sides of the room. And El tried to figure out how that could be. They were fighting because they loved each

other, not the other way around.

El wasn't quite ready for college. She'd barely scraped by with passing grades in high school, not because she wasn't smart, but because she had the disadvantage of being raised as a lab rat instead of a person. She'd missed out on almost eight years of public education, not to mention deprived of all the social intricacies that came with simply interacting with another human being on a daily basis. Because they couldn't even give her that. She'd spent days upon days locked in that cell, her only meals shoved through a slot in the wall, her only companion a stuffed animal.

Mike had offered to stay. The day he got his acceptance letter, he called her at the station, telling her he'd take classes at the community college, so they could spend more time together . . . She'd cut him off, unable to keep the tears from bleeding through the phone. Refusing to be anyone's burden, even his. Refusing to deny him a chance at a future, at a career, at life. He'd given her nothing less, and she intended to return the favor. He'd begun to cry, as well. She could hear it through the static and the void between them. She'd hung up when she could no longer speak for the sobs that wracked her body, and Flo let her go home early, but not without a plate full of homemade cookies.

They talked about it, later. They got burgers at the drive-through and headed up to the junkyard. They ate in silence, and Mike teased her about dipping french fries in her milkshake, a habit she'd picked up from Hopper. But the humor fell flat. It all felt wrong. Cardboard. And there was this wall between them she couldn't get through. Mike had always been the conversationalist. She wasn't good with words, and so he filled in the blanks, for her. He must've seen it in her face, knew they couldn't avoid the conversation forever. Not after their breakdown over the phone. So he brought it up, and they began to argue, and then Mike leaned forward and kissed her, so deeply it made her mind go impossibly blank. And it felt so good and familiar and yet ethereal, almost like time and space and some higher power had aligned to bring them to this moment, together. She gave in, kissing him back, which was better than arguing. And then they had sex in his car, which was way better.

"The twenty-eighth." Mike said, derailing her train of thought. "But I

leave next Sunday, to unpack and settle in." El's breath caught in her throat. Ten days. That gave them ten days together. Now it was her turn to avert her eyes, swallowing panic. She sensed his gaze flick over her face, testing her emotional waters for any disturbance. She did her best to keep the surface calm. She couldn't let him know how much this was killing her. If he knew, he'd never leave. And she'd never forgive herself. That was just the way he was. Selfless, loyal to a fault. The same qualities that led him to jump off a literal cliff for his friend. El refrained from rolling her eyes at the memory. He was such an idiot, sometimes. If she hadn't been there . . . Her stomach turned at the thought. They would've had to pull his broken body out of the quarry. That would've been the end of Mike Wheeler.

"That gives us ten days." She said, after a while, trying to sound positive. Mike nodded, weakly. They lapsed into tense silence, again, and El bit her lip, despairing. Was it always going to be this way? Each one missing the other, and, when they did get to spend some time together, both of them dreading the moment they'd have to let go. She hoped not.

El fished in her pocket for a cigarette and placed it between her lips. She stole them from Hop, occasionally. She lit it and inhaled. Mike cocked an eyebrow. She shrugged and took another drag, watching the smoke curl from the end and dissipate in the warm, August air. She offered it to Mike, who eyed it with some hesitation before giving in, raising it to his lips, looking every bit a kid playing at being older. He exhaled and coughed, eyes beginning to water. El laughed.

"Amateur."

"Those things'll kill you." He coughed, handing it back. El didn't respond. She dropped the cigarette into the dirt and crushed it under the toe of her Chuck Taylor. Mike offered his hand and El took it, her small, slender fingers immediately enveloped in warmth. He lifted their entwined hands to his lips and pressed a kiss on each one of her knuckles. Some of the tension, the dread, drained from her body, then, leaving an empty, fuzzy lightness behind. She sighed, leaning into his chest. She tipped her chin back, gazing into his face, letting her fingertips wander. She traced his brow, the bridge of his nose, ran her thumb over his bottom lip. His eyes swallowed her, brewing with a distant storm. The light in them had dimmed, somewhat, and she

knew his thoughts dwelled elsewhere. El felt that familiar, heavy dread settle back into the pit of her stomach.

"What?" She asked. Mike blinked, surprised.

"What?"

"Tell me what you're thinking, right now." She said.

Mike shrugged.

"You're beautiful."

She could almost ignore it. She could almost go about her business with the inevitability of his leaving stuffed in some dusty closet in her mind. She could almost accept it. If he was happy, that's all that mattered. They'd figure it out, like they always did. Until she began to see his cracks beginning to widen. Until she realized just how much he was trying to hold it all together. Until he began to lie to her.

"Mike." She said, quietly. "Friends don't lie."

Mike looked at her like she'd begun to speak in tongues.

"I'm not lying, El."

She looked at him, helpless. Every instinct urged her to probe him, to widen those cracks a little more, to let it all spill out, so she could begin to pick up the pieces and glue him back together. He'd always been her pillar of strength. Her light in the darkness, after so many years of dark closets and cold shoulders and sandpaper hands. She would defend that light until her dying breath.

She would die for him.

She thought it as she looked at him, this boy, who'd been nothing less than her home, in every sense of the word. When he brought her to the cabin in the woods, he told her it was home. But that didn't feel like home, at all. It was a prison dressed up like a home. It still felt cold and small and unforgiving. She'd looked up the dictionary definition and tried to reconcile it with that little shack he'd built for

them, but it just didn't add up. It took her a couple years to find a true definition for the word. It took her awhile to realize she'd found a home long before Hopper found her out in the snow, that night. And she'd found it in Mike. In his scent, in the way his eyes lit up and his eyebrows disappeared under his unruly mop of dark curls when he talked about his plans for D&D campaigns. She'd found it in his basement, underneath a canopy of blankets, the first place she'd ever felt safe. She'd found it in his voice, in his definition of *friend* and *promise*, in his hands and his lips and the dusting of freckles on his cheeks.

She would die for him.

She averted her eyes, glancing at the blended shades of gold and green in the leaves above them as the midday sunlight filtered through the trees. She opened her mouth, closed it again, picking at a loose thread in the hem of her t-shirt. Why ruin a happy moment? One of the few they'd share, over the next ten days. Too few, but there was no point in licking old wounds. She looked at him.

"C'mon, let's go back to your place." She said, changing the subject. He took her hand, once again, and they continued on, following the curve of the tracks.

She returned home late, that night. Hop was asleep on the couch. She could hear him snoring. She tiptoed past him and went into the kitchen, rolling her eyes. She grabbed a snack from the kitchen and snuck up the stairs, to her room. It was hot and stuffy in there, so she opened the window, letting in a rush of lukewarm air. She settled herself on the bed and unwrapped her energy bar, memories tugging her thoughts astray.

"I've got a surprise."

Hopper turned the key, shutting off the Blazer's engine. It flickered and died. The chattering of crickets and night creatures, restless in the warm air, rushed to fill the silence.

"Close your eyes." Hopper said. El craned her neck, peering out of the car window. She didn't recognize the street. She looked at him.

"What are we doing here?"

"Just close your eyes, El." Hopper said.

"Dad . . ." El said, exasperated. She'd perfected the infamous Mike Wheeler Eye-Roll. Nonetheless, she closed her eyes, sighing in annoyance.

"It's worth it, I promise." Hopper said, shutting off the headlights. He jogged over to the passenger side, helping El out of her seat. He led her up the walk, down a block and around the corner. For a while, their breathing and the crickets' song were the only sounds. El tugged on his sleeve.

"This is stupid." She said, bluntly. "I don't even know what you're . . ." She trailed off, as Hopper's footsteps on the crumbling asphalt came to a halt.

"You can open your eyes." He said, and El didn't miss the note of excitement in his voice. Her belly swooped, low. She peered through the cracks in her fingers. For a moment, she didn't get it.

"It's just . . . a house." She said, blankly, lowering her hands. She peered at the front, the wrap-around porch and the white picket fence and the windows, glowing with soft light. The front door was painted bright red. "Hop, what're we doing here?"

He looked at her, grinning. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a cigarette, idly. He hunted for his lighter, and El glanced back at the house.

"I don't understand." El said, as she always did when things weren't clear. When she required a further explanation. And Hopper was usually more than willing to provide one. Not this time, apparently. He lit his cigarette and dragged, still grinning his stupid grin, biding his time. El huffed and folded her arms across her chest, flicking a piece of hair out of her face.

"Are you going to tell me what this is about?" She asked. "Who lives here?"

Hop's grin widened.

"As of two days ago," he said, pulling a mysterious object from the folds of his jacket, pressing it into El's palm. "We do."

El glanced at her hand.

Keys. A pair of keys.

Her head snapped up, eyes locking on his face.

"No."

"Yes."

"But . . . the cabin . . ." She said, dumbfounded.

"I think we can both agree you've outgrown the cabin." Hopper said. "You need space. I need space. And we need a place with a damn air conditioner."

She couldn't help it. Her face broke into a smile. She threw her arms around him, immediately consumed by the fabric of his coat and the scent of smoke and the steadiness, the safety, of his arms, around her shoulders. He pressed a kiss, roughened by stubble, on her forehead.

"Welcome home, kid."

He led her up the steps, and they paused outside the big, red door. Hopper glanced at El, and she took his hand, squaring her shoulders. Both seemed to realize the enormity of the moment. The first of many firsts. He unlocked the door, pushed it open, and together, they stepped inside.

The entryway was wide, with a stairwell to the left and a bare coat hanger to the right. It opened into an empty room, absent of any furniture. El smiled, feeling impossibly full and light.

"Can I pick my room?" She asked, and Hop smiled.

"Of course, kiddo."

She dashed up the stairs. She opened every door, peering into the rooms, footsteps soft and silent on the carpeted floors. Finally, she settled on a bedroom near the front of the house. It had a big window, and an A-frame ceiling that slanted above the place where her bed might be. She'd plaster the walls with posters, put a dressing table there, by the door, and a bookshelf here . . . El paused, standing in the middle of the empty rooms,

pressing her palms to her face, feeling her smile, the heat in her cheeks, flushed with excitement and joy.

It was hers. All hers. El had never lived in a house. She'd been in Mike's house plenty of times. And Will's, too. But she'd never called one home. Now, they had a house.

"Ellie?" She heard Hop call, from the stairs.

"In here." She said, surprised to find her voice thick with unshed tears. Hopper appeared in the doorway. He cocked an eyebrow, stepping inside.

"You okay?" He asked, concerned.

El laughed, at the absurdity of the question.

"Yes." She said, closing her eyes. Hop stood there, unsure whether to go to her, to comfort her. She made the decision for him, crossing the room, wrapping her arms around him.

"I'm happy." She said, and she meant it. "Thanks, Dad."

Hop's mouth twitched, and it was his turn to blink back tears.

"Sure, kiddo." He said, and his voice broke.

She called Mike the minute they returned to the cabin, tripping over her words to tell him the good news. He pretended to be surprised. The truth was, he'd been in on the secret for a while. The new house was situated a few blocks down from the Wheeler's. Walking distance. Five minutes on foot, two or three by bike. Hopper wondered if it would bite him in the ass, someday. Probably. Christ, those two couldn't keep their hands off each other if they tried.

They spent the next week moving in, slowly but surely. El collected her things and put them in boxes. She didn't own much, but the few belongings she had were packed up with care, labeled with a sharpie. She took some time to comb through everything, turning over Nancy Drew and Anne of the Green Gables over in her hands, blowing the dust off the covers, running her hands over the binding and the pages. She packed up her turntable and records, her Star Wars action figures and her Super Com, given to her by the party as a first-ever Christmas present. A pile of

comics, mostly X-Men. The boys kept her in steady supply of them. Her favorite sweatshirt. A blue one, which belonged to Mike. It smelled like him. Her one-eyed stuffed bear, which belonged to Sara before it belonged to her. These little treasures, which she didn't lend much thought to, most days. Which made her choke up with a fresh wave of tears as she held them in her hands before stowing them away in their proper box.

Hop rented a moving truck, and the boys came by to help with some of the heavy lifting. If El gave the squashy old sofa or the oak china cabinet a telekinetic nudge to aid their efforts, they pretended not to notice. She swiped a hand under her nose. No blood. Mike noticed this gesture, caught her fingers in his hand and pressed them to his lips, while Dustin and Lucas pretended to throw up and Hop yelled at them to stop fucking around and help me lift this . . .

El smiled, feeling as if her heart might burst.

When most of the furniture had been moved in, El and Hop opened the door to the basement, where El had found the file about her mama. Where the box labeled Sara lived, gathering dust. She helped him lift the boxes, stacking them in a big pile in the middle of the empty cabin. Hopper shut the door, eyeing the boxes as if they might come to life and eat them. He rubbed a hand over his chin, scratching at his beard. He looked tired and old, a few more lines had appeared in his face.

"We'll tackle that tomorrow." He said, wearily. He looked at her, the corners of his mouth reaching skyward. The tiredness disappeared. "You hungry?"

They ordered a pizza and ate it on the kitchen floor, sitting with their backs against the cabinets, legs sprawled over the linoleum. The cheap, plastic fold-up table they'd used at the cabin hadn't made it onto the moving van. Hop cracked a beer, and El sipped a 7-Up. They listened to the chatter of the night creatures out the open window, eating in comfortable silence.

Hop got up, dug the old radio out of a cardboard box, and set it on the counter. He fiddled with the dials, searching for a station. Eventually, an old, bluesy song floated into the room. He took El's hand, and she laughed, exasperated and amused, letting him pull her to her feet, half-eaten slice of pepperoni pizza long forgotten. He took her hands, turning

her in slow, graceful circles. And they danced, barefoot, around the kitchen, until the song dissolved into static.

"What's this?" El asked. She sat on the floor, cross-legged, leafing through a large box full of photos and files and junk. She held up a large, manila folder. Hopper took it and licked his thumb, flicking through it. He frowned and shook his head.

"It's not important. Toss it." El did, turning her attention to a pile of photos. A smile broke over her face as she thumbed through the fragments of their lives. Fireworks, on the Fourth; a candid shot of Nancy, laughing; Sara, holding a butterfly in her palm; The party, passed out on the floor after a twelve-hour D&D campaign; Steve, mussing Dustin's hair; El and Mike, asleep on the couch, arms slung around each other; Hop and El, decorating a tree with tinsel and ornaments, during the holidays. El's smile grew wider. She tucked them in the Keep Pile and moved on to the next box, lifting the lid. She stiffened, reading the name scrawled across the side.

"Hop?" She asked, and swallowed. "Dad?"

"Mmmmm?" He said, not looking up from a fat binder full of insurance papers and whatnot.

"Sara." She said, quietly. She returned the lid, carefully, so as not to disturb the ghosts. The tiredness returned to Hop's face. He looked at her, brows knitting.

"It's okay, El." He said. "We gotta go through it, sometime. It's just a box." The words were meant more for himself. "Come here."

She obeyed, settling beside him, carrying the box on her lap. She set the lid aside, and together, they sorted through it. There were a couple files, a copy of her birth certificate, medical bills, and the like. There was a scrapbook full of baby pictures, which Hop set aside. Among the scrapbook and the files, there were a couple of toys and puzzles, not much else. Tentatively, Hopper lifted the scrapbook onto his lap and brushed the dust off the cover, opening it. He flipped through the pages, peering at the photos. El reached for him, took his hand. He looked at her. She offered a small, sad smile. His mouth twitched, looking down at their hand. His large hand enclosed in her small one. He wrapped an arm around her

shoulders, leaning his forehead against her temple.

He didn't say anything. He didn't need to. Something passed between them—silent, yes, but as sure and tangible as words, spoken aloud.

He took her to the store, to get some things for her room. El chose some deep purple curtains for the window, and sheets and pillowcases to match; the vivid color combatted the stark whiteness of the room. Hopper invested in a rug, for the living room; a bookcase; a waffle-maker. El talked him into bringing home some potted plants, to decorate the porch. She hung a wind chime out there, too, and the soft, tinkling melody would forever accompany their memories of that house.

El suggested they invite everyone over for a housewarming party. Hopper agreed, begrudgingly, because, let's face it, he was no match for those brown eyes. Those brown eyes, they could kill you with a glance.

He set up a buffet of sorts in the kitchen, mostly hamburgers and hot dogs and chips and dip. El pushed two, long fold-up tables together, in the backyard and set up chairs for everyone. All of the party, plus Joyce, Jonathan, Steve, and Nancy. Mike arrived first, arms laden with grocery bags. He earned his driver's license a few months before and offered to pick up plates, napkins, and other commodities. El rushed to help him, stealing a kiss. Joyce, Jonathan, and Will arrived, next. Joyce shoved a home-made casserole into Hopper's arms and swept El into a hug. When the rest of the party, accompanied by Steve, arrived, El ushered them inside and hugged them each in turn. Steve grinned, mussing her hair.

"Hey, Weirdo."

"Hey, Loser."

Of all their friendships, formed over the past few years, El and Steve's remained the oddest. He liked the kid, superpowers and all. He appreciated her candor, her childish interest in anything and everything, her willingness to sit around and listen to him, for hours, while he entertained her with stories of all the stupid shit King Steve did, during his high school career. Steve worked at the station, with Hopper, so El saw a lot of him.

He wandered off to join Dustin in the kitchen, and Mike seized his

opportunity to pull El away from the party.

"So . . ." he asked, "can I see your room?" He smiled, sheepishly. El grinned, taking his hand, lacing her fingers in the spaces between his own, a gesture as natural as breathing. Together, they went upstairs, and El led him to her bedroom, showing him the curtains and the gargantuan Star Wars: A New Hope poster, hanging above her bed. She found herself standing very close to him, in the center of the room. His fingertips traced patterns over her palms, then found the small of her back, the strip of bare skin where her shirt lifted as she stood on tip-toes to reach his lips. She shivered. And then they were kissing, and there wasn't enough oxygen in the room, and she felt that familiar swoopy, dizzy feeling whenever she was near him, whenever she kissed him. It started tentative and soft and slow, at first, but the kisses got needier, hungrier. They were growing into themselves, getting older, after all. The chaste kisses and shy smiles had turned into something . . . more. She fisted a hand in his wild mess of dark curls, inhaling the scent of him, like syrup and rain and autumn. Unmistakably him.

A sharp rapping on the door's frame interrupted them, and they sprang apart. El turned, heart hammering against her ribcage. Hopper stood in the doorway, wagging a finger at them.

"Busted!" He said. "In case you've forgotten, El, you've got guests to attend." He shot her a pointed look.

"Dad . . ."

"I don't wanna hear it. Out." Hopper snapped, shaking his head. "Wheeler, keep your hands off my kid."

"Yes, Sir." Mike said, weakly, blood flooding his cheeks.

Hop gave a short harrumph, stomping off.

"This conversation isn't over, El." He warned, over his shoulder.

El caught Mike's eye, and they burst into laughter.

Everyone took a seat, in the backyard. El and Mike played footsie, under the table, and Max flicked bits of Joyce's casserole at Dustin. Will doodled on his napkin. Hopper and Joyce sat at the end of the table, talking, and

El stole glances at them, feeling her chest grow lighter. Joyce was good for him. Once again, El ran through the scenarios in her mind. The image of the five of them, Joyce and Hop, Will and Jonathan and herself, a family . . . it was so clear and real and reachable in her mind, it stole all the breath from her lungs and filled her with giddy, childish happiness.

Halfway through dinner, the sky split open, and rain began to pour. A warm, summer rain, drenching everything. El leapt to her feet. The others did the same, grabbing their plates, sprinting toward the house.

They crammed into the kitchen, out of the rain, and Jonathan and Steve found extra chairs in the garage. They all squeezed around the tiny plastic table, and El wedged herself between Hopper and Mike. She wrapped an arm around Hop's shoulders. Her opposite hand found its way into Mike's. Hop looked at her, smiling. Mike squeezed her hand, running his thumb over her knuckles. And El glanced around, at their faces. Her family. A strange, broken, haphazard family, but a family, all the same.

El smiled, at the memory. This place had become a more permanent definition of home. Hop bought it the summer of her fifteenth year, and it had been home ever since. It's walls had seen its fair share of happy memories, some of the best in all of her eighteen years. Sleepovers and holidays and meals, stolen kisses and rainy afternoons. But it wasn't the house, really. Just the people in it.

She finished off her energy bar and tossed the wrapper in the trash. She grabbed a book from her bedside table and leaned against her headboard, searching for the correct page. It followed the story of a police officer trying to solve a missing persons case in Paris, during World War II. She began to read, trying to not to think about everything else, which was, in itself, a form of thinking about everything else. It was futile. She kept losing her place, mind elsewhere, until she read the same sentence four times. She closed the book and tossed it aside, letting her head fall back onto the pillows. She stared at the ceiling, letting her thoughts bounce around her skull until they dulled to a low drone, like radio static, and she slipped into a shallow, uneasy sleep.

She went over to Mike's house to help him pack. It was a Wednesday, and the sky hung heavy with clouds. It looked like it might rain. They

spent the day upstairs in his room, sorting through books and belongings. His walls were bare, stripped of posters and photos. Stacks of cardboard boxes sat on his bed, along with a large suitcase. A pile of discarded items grew in the center of the room—a heap of clothes that didn't fit, books he no longer read, and toys he hadn't touched in years. El frowned, turning his Yoda action figure over in her hand, heavy with nostalgia.

This week had been the hardest. Dustin left yesterday. Lucas, the day before. Will's classes started about a week after Mike's. And El wondered if things would ever be the same. If they'd still gather on Saturday nights to watch Star Wars or Ghostbusters. If Mike would still plan campaigns, if Max would still skate, if Lucas would still hike down to the creek, looking for pollywogs. If Dustin would still embark on curiosity voyages and hoard candy in his pockets, if Will would still draw. Would they grow up and grow apart or stay together? Would they still be as close as they are, now, or would they grow distant and detached. Would there be the same camaraderie, the jokes and innuendos and arguments that came so easily, so naturally it was like breathing, for them? Or would the words exchanged on holidays and special occasions when they finally saw each other again be reserved and formal, maybe even a little tense? El wanted to believe it would be the same, whether they were on opposite corners of the globe or just down the street, but she wasn't so naive. She knew distance was a hard thing to trump. She knew people grow apart. But she also knew you don't fight inter-dimensional monsters together without sharing a lifelong bond. And they'd fought a lot of monsters. They were her family, and the family that fought inter-dimensional monsters together stuck together, so why was this idea of all of them heading in opposite directions such a hard thing to swallow? These thoughts hung like dark clouds over El's mental sky, so she shoved them away, into that dusty closet.

"Take a break, should we?" El asked, in her best Yoda voice, brandishing the action figure at him. He laughed, nodding.

"Make us peanut butter sandwiches, I will."

They went downstairs, and El sat on the counter as he retrieved a jar of peanut butter from the cabinet. She snatched it away and opened the lid, digging a spoon into it. She smacked her lips, humming

appreciatively.

"Chunky." She said. "My favorite."

They grabbed a blanket from the living room and went outside for a picnic in the yard, and Mike lay with his head in her lap as she combed her fingers through his hair and decorated his curls with dandelions.

She looked at him as he grinned up at her, feeling the world slowly reeling out of her control. She saw the past six years condensed into a single moment, saw time as some tangible thing falling through the cracks between her fingers like sand. She saw a little girl with a shaved head and bruises under her eyes. She saw a boy with a scrape on his chin, screaming *"Let her go! Let her go, you bastard!"* as she lay in Papa's—no, Brenner's—arms, clinging to consciousness. He was so scared. They both were. And all she remembered was his hand clutching hers as they ran through the hallways, as the sound of gunfire and dying men echoed around them. He asked for a promise, and she broke it. They were older, now, but were they so different, really? They were still Mike and El. Still the same kids who'd met on that cold, rainy night. They were still spinning in each other's orbit. They'd lived through some weird shit, but they got through it together, and El counted her lucky stars.

And there had been the good times, the endless summers spent under a blanket of stars. The campaigns and the jokes and the times they were allowed to be children. Their walks down the tracks, their swims in the quarry, their shared cigarettes and shared dances and shared kisses. How was it that time moved so fast? They'd grown up too quickly. How was it that El hadn't noticed until now?

She sucked in a breath, forcing herself back into the present. Dipping her toes in, it was too easy to get caught in the undercurrent.

After lunch, they went back to his room, but neither of them were in the mood for packing, anyway, so they just lay on his bed, wrapped in each other's embrace. El felt exhaustion weighing on her and began to drift off into the gray space between being awake and asleep, letting the sound of his heartbeat drown out everything else, until the creak of the front door's hinges woke her and and Mrs.

Wheeler rapped on the door and asked if El wanted to stay for dinner.

Mike left midday, on Monday. They said their goodbyes on the front porch of the Wheeler household. His parents were driving him to Indianapolis.

He stood on the steps, hands cupping her elbows, not looking at her. She opened her mouth, closed it again. There were a million things she should say, but she couldn't get the words out. She just looked at him, drinking him in—the curve of his brow, the slope of his nose, the corners of his mouth and the dark pools of his eyes, which held so much and gave so much away.

He'd spent the night, and she could still feel the sensation of his lips on her skin in all the places he'd kissed her and touched her and held her. She still smelled like him, and she found herself dreading the moment it would begin to fade.

He met her eyes. Without a word, he enfolded her in his arms. She began to cry, and she could feel him shaking in an effort to hide his own tears, but they came, anyway. And he was pressing her to his chest so tightly she thought she might dissolve and become a part of him, and he was saying "I love you, El. I love you. I love you. I love you. I'll call you when I get there. And the day after. And every day. I love you." And she was saying it back until her brain and her words got so muddled with sobs she shut up and just breathed him in, hating the way her face felt so hot and puffy. Hating the way her throat and her chest ached. Hating the way she felt so out of control, and falling apart at the seams. She promised herself she wouldn't do this. She was supposed to hold it all together. He kissed her, long and deep, and then Mrs. Wheeler's Station Wagon was pulling out of the driveway. And he was gone.

2. Chapter 2

El held the stick with trembling fingers. She glanced at the box, at the instructions printed on the side. Three minutes. How long had it been? One minute? Two? Thirty seconds? She didn't know. She couldn't focus, couldn't catch her breath. The lights were overbright, and the ground seemed to dip and roll under her feet. She sat down on the toilet seat, dizzy.

It hadn't crossed her mind. Even after the occasional bouts of nausea and fatigue . . . she hadn't really noticed anything off until her second missed period, and even then, it was a passing thought. Maybe it was because Hopper had never had the Talk with her, and her limited knowledge of what went on between the birds and the bees came from exactly two sources: batty old Mrs. Fowler during ninth grade health class and a gaggle of prepubescent teenage boys. Or maybe it was because she'd known, for a while, and she just couldn't bring herself to confront the truth. So she denied it. Even after two months of aching and bloating and waves of nausea that left her clammy and shaking, it wasn't a physical symptom that brought it to her attention. It was an a tug, like a nibble at the end of a fishing line. She didn't think much of it. Sometimes she picked up on other people's thoughts, some shout in the void, without meaning to.

When she first felt it, she'd been at the station, talking to frazzled woman whose car had been broken into, the night before. El filled out the case file, trying to be patient with the woman, masking her irritation. All morning, the littlest things got under her skin. The coffee maker was taking too long, and she'd missed Mike's call, last night, and Hop was in one of his moods, which, in turn, put her in an even worse mood than she already was. To top that off, the new intern had spilled coffee all over some paperwork she'd been filling out. So, yes, she was irritated. But at least she was *trying* to be patient.

Tensions were running high when she finally handed the file to Powell and bid the woman a hasty goodbye, excusing herself to use the bathroom.

A few minutes of peace, she thought, *that's all I want*. She went into the

stall and locked the door. She dropped onto the toilet seat and let her head fall into her hands, trying to soothe away the beginnings of a headache growing in her temples. The ache wasn't enough to condone an aspirin, but enough to annoy her. She combed a hand through her unruly curls. She'd slept in late and hadn't had time to brush through it. She took a breath, pressing her fingers over her eyelids to ward off the artificial light.

It was in this stolen moment that she felt something shift. An undercurrent. A separate consciousness. It passed like a fleeting shadow, and she barely thought twice about it, unlocking the bathroom door, knowing she'd been gone long enough. Flo would be on her case if she didn't get back to work. She unlocked the stall, steeling herself in anticipation of facing the growing pile of papers she had to file and phone calls she had to make. Plus, there was an old cardboard box full of Halloween decorations that needed to be put up. Around lunchtime, Hopper stormed in, cigarette between his lips, going off about something, then stomped down the hall. They all winced as the door slammed shut, behind him, and then Flo made her go check on him.

"Why me?" She'd cried, indignantly. Flo just shot her a look that said all that needed to be said, and so El reluctantly got up from her chair and slunk down the hall to see what his deal was. And that was just one roadbump in an already shitty day. The chaos at the station helped her forget all about that strange flutter she'd felt, brushing against her mind, until she was packing up to go home.

She told Hop she'd meet him at the house. She stepped outside, pulling her black, knit sweater tighter around her shoulders. Halloween was a mere week away. An autumn chill tainted the breeze, and dead leaves skittered across the pavement, gathering on lawns and in gutters. El surveyed the street in the fading light, watching Cal climb into his car and pull out of his parking space. She lifted her hand in farewell, then got into her car. She turned onto the main road, humming tunelessly, surfing the radio channels with a tilt of her chin. After a moment's indecision, she made a left, heading to Rosale's, a store across town. She avoided Melvald's, in the unfortunate event she might run into Joyce.

As she made her way up the walk, she kept glancing over her

shoulder, unable to shake the uneasy, guilty feeling twisting in her gut, as if she was doing something she shouldn't. Unable to rid herself of the fear that someone might recognize her, which was actually very likely, in a town like Hawkins. She pulled open the door, and a rush of warm air greeted her, soothing the numbness in her cheeks. An employee—a boy not much older than her, face studded with acne—greeted her. She tried to smile in return, averting her eyes. She wandered the aisles until she found what she was looking for. A pregnancy test, packaged in a little pink box. She picked it up, perturbed to find her fingers were shaking. She turned the box over in her hands, mouthing the words as she read: *Fast, accurate results!*

She tucked it under her elbow and continued to look around, picking up a pack of batteries and a bottle of shampoo and some aspirin, for her headache. She knew they were almost out. Plus, if Hop asked any questions, she'd have something to show for herself. She took the items to checkout, refusing to make eye contact with the clerk. As soon as she paid for her stuff, she was heading towards the door, resisting the urge to sprint to the parking lot.

"Miss, would you like your receipt?" The clerk asked.

"No, thanks!" El called, letting the door swing shut, behind her.

During the drive home, she cranked up the volume on the radio, and a pop song about love and nothing drowned out all those nebulous, stormcloud thoughts tormenting her until she composed herself enough to join Hop for dinner.

They had leftover spaghetti for dinner. She pretended like nothing was going on. She'd gotten good at it, over the years. She didn't want to worry him. He sacrificed enough for her, already. She ignored the panic gnawing at her insides, trading bits of conversation with him, but her thoughts wandered to that little pink box tucked in her bag. She thought of the flutter she'd felt, in the void. An awakening. Like a woodland creature stirring after a long hibernation. Almost indistinguishable from the traffic of her own thoughts, it was enough to catch her attention, and now she found herself dwelling on it. Like a song you don't know you like until you really listen to the lyrics, and then you start to hear it on the radio, everywhere you go.

She excused herself from the table and went upstairs. She paced around her room, eyeing the pregnancy test as if it might come alive and eat her. She tidied up, shelving books and folding clothes. She paced some more, wringing her hands, until she could no longer avoid the inevitable. She put a Fleetwood Mac vinyl on the turntable and locked herself in the bathroom, shaking from head to toe.

Now, here she was, sitting on the edge of the toilet seat. The room spun, around her. She checked her watch. Three minutes.

She took a breath, steeled herself. Two lines. Positive.

El stared at it, numb. Her ears began to ring. She felt insubstantial, like a ghost. Like she might float away on a breeze or fade into dust. She squeezed her eyes shut, counted to five, and opened them again, as if that would make it all go away. No luck. She got to her feet, shakily, and the test slipped out of her fingers. It clattered on the bathroom floor, and she fumbled around for a minute, floundering, caught in a riptide. She retrieved it and stuffed it in her pocket. She unlocked the door, struggling with the knob. Her limbs didn't seem to be obeying her brain signals, at the moment. Her knees dissolved into jelly as she lurched down the hall, barely making it to her room before the tears started to fall, thick and fast. She clapped a hand over her mouth, closed the door, and collapsed on the bed. By then, her tears became sobs that wracked her entire body, and all she could do was shove her face into her pillow, desperate to hold onto something as the world spun out of control.

How could she be so stupid? She was so, so stupid. And now this was real and it was happening and she couldn't wrap her brain around it. She just lay there, sobbing, waves of grief and panic and guilt pulling her head underwater. She gasped for air, trying to soothe the ache in her chest, for lack of oxygen. She cried herself out, until she lay there, hiccuping, feeling drained and empty. Like someone had cut her open and let everything bleed out. It didn't make her feel better.

She wiped at her eyes. Slowly, she slipped a hand under her shirt and rested it on her abdomen, over the place where her baby grew. She stroked a fingertip across her waistline and closed her eyes, forcing herself to take deep, measured breaths.

She'd have to deal with this. She was a stupid teenager, stupid and in love and she'd let it get in the way of making any sort of intelligent decisions. Nobody had ever really told her how it all worked. She recalls all the times she and Mike slept together. They'd always used protection. But sometimes that failed. Sometimes the odds were skewed. And it was too late to change things, anyway. She knew there wasn't any point crying over spilled milk, but she couldn't stop the tears.

Her thoughts ran on a continuous loop, chasing each other around her skull. And they kept coming back to Hopper. It was like picking a scab. It hurt to dig your fingernails under the hardened skin, to pare it from the wound, to let the blood flow. But it was hard to stop, once you started. And despite the horrible ache in her chest, she couldn't stop her thoughts from returning to him. What would he say, when she told him? How would he react? She pictured the shades of disappointment and anger crossing his face, and it was enough to prompt a fresh wave of tears. She wasn't supposed to be his responsibility. They found their way into each other's lives by chance, and he'd become her family. He'd signed up for the job, but he certainly hadn't signed up for this. And now she was dropping a bomb on him. Literally. A tiny, ticking time bomb.

She tried to imagine what it looked like. Was it simply a cluster of cells? Did it have a heartbeat? Did it have a nose and hands and eyes and feet? Did it have fingers and toes? She shivered, rolling onto her side, body curved into a C, both hands pressed flat against her stomach. Skin to skin contact. She closed her eyes, tears streaming down her face, and listened. And she felt it. A tiny consciousness, a tiny mind. It was close. She could almost . . . touch it.

What would Mike say?

Would he be disappointed? Disgusted? Happy? He'd left for college less than two months ago. How could she ask him to throw in the towel, now? How could she ask him to put everything on hold just because their protection failed?

She couldn't.

She wouldn't.

She'd just have to deal with this. She'd give Mike a choice. And they'd figure it out, together, like they always did.

She took a breath, listening to Stevie Nicks ask, "*would you stay if she promised you heaven?*"

El's breaths slowed, as she lay staring at the ceiling, watching the shadows thrown by passing headlights chase across the walls, letting the song drown out her racing thoughts. She fell into a slumber filled with strange, wandering dreams. Dreams she wouldn't remember when she woke.

Steve sat with his feet propped up on the desk, watching El hang a string of orange, pumpkin-shaped lanterns in the front window of the station. She stood on a step-stool, cursing her height, fumbling with a thumbtack. She dropped it, and it rolled onto the floor and out of sight, under a file cabinet. She swore.

"Woah, you kiss your mother with that mouth?" Steve asked, half-joking. El turned, glaring at him.

"Hand me that tack, will you?" She asked.

Steve's eyebrows disappeared under his mop of hair.

"Geez, if looks could kill . . ." He bent down, searching for the stray tack, then resurfaced, holding it out to her. She took it, pinning the end of the cord to the wall, and plugged it in. The lanterns glowed a bright, cheerful orange. She climbed down from the ladder and folded it, leaning it against the wall. She returned to her desk, pinching the bridge of her nose to relieve the pressure in her head.

"Hey, you okay?" Steve asked, brows knitting. He touched her shoulder, gently. She looked at him.

"Yeah, just tired."

Steve's eyes narrowed.

"You look like you just got trampled by a pack of demodogs."

"Thanks?"

"You sure you're getting enough sleep?"

El cocked an eyebrow.

"Steve, I don't need a babysitter."

"Who says?" He said. "And I'm a damn good one, so show a little more appreciation, Hopper."

El rolled her eyes, sticking her tongue out. Steve grinned.

"There she is."

That tempted a smile out of her. Steve's smile widened. Apparently, she'd given him all the encouragement he needed, and he took it upon himself to entertain her. He coaxed her into a paper football tournament until the game got so heated Flo confiscated the football and sent them outside. She accompanied him on patrol, flicking through the radio channels for a good station, and Steve insisted on belting out the lyrics to every song that came on. He let her turn on the lights, and she let out a triumphant cry as he floored the gas pedal and they sped down the highway. By the time they returned, El's worries didn't seem so dire, and ache in her chest had lightened, considerably. The morning's exhaustion didn't weigh on her so much. Figures. She could always count on Steve to make her laugh, to banish the storm clouds from her horizon. And for that, she was grateful.

At home, she watched Family Feud with Hopper until he fell asleep, on the couch. She went upstairs to be alone with her thoughts. Steve's company at the station had given her a distraction, and a bit of distance from the capital-P Problem. And El thought she could maybe possibly sorta muster up the courage to deal with it. And by dealing with it, she meant calling Mike. It had been nearly forty-eight hours since she'd found out, and she still hadn't told the father of her child that he was, in fact, going to be a father.

She hadn't told Hopper, either. She hadn't told anyone.

It wasn't like she hadn't tried. Yesterday, she'd sat in the shower and

ran through all the possible scenarios in her mind. She spent so much time in there all the hot water ran out, and icy water doused her and left her shivering. And of all the possible scenarios, none of them seemed all that promising. The ones that were bearable seemed almost too good to be true, and the ones that were less than ideal were so unpleasant she immediately shoved them away, refusing to dwell on them. A phantom voice echoed in her head, a voice that belonged to Mike but seemed alien, too. A voice telling her he wanted no part in raising their child, and that he couldn't love her. That he never did. And then there was the voice telling her she had no right to call him at all, to disrupt this new chapter of his life when it had barely begun. Another voice told her she couldn't hide this from him. That if she tried to keep it a secret, he'd never forgive her. It just wasn't an option. She would have to tell him, sometime. The question was when.

She'd stepped out of the shower, slipped into her bathrobe, and picked up the phone. She dialed his number, but she didn't even make it to the third ring before she set the phone down, shaking and gasping for breath, the secret turning to ashes in her mouth, suffocating her.

It had to happen sometime, she reminded herself. Better to get it over with. Like ripping off a band-aid.

El paused, staring at the phone. She took a breath, picked it up, and dialed his dorm room. He picked up on the second ring, before she had time to change her mind.

"Hello?"

"Mike." She said, fighting to keep her voice steady.

"El!" He said, excitedly. "What's up? It's good to hear your voice."

"Oh, not much . . ." She said, trailing off. She twisted the phone's cord around her finger and sat on the carpet, leaning against her dresser. "I've been busy at the station. It's been a bit chaotic, these past few days." She told him, hating the way her voice didn't sound like her own.

"El, you okay?" Mike asked, concerned, and El bit her lip. It was just like him to know exactly when something was bothering her, even through the phone. Even with so much space between them.

"Yeah, I'm fine." She lied. "Listen, I'm thinking about driving up there, this weekend."

"This weekend? Yeah, I mean, I think my roommate's going to be out of town for the weekend, so it actually works out. We'll have the dorm to ourselves. I'll show you around campus, and . . ."

"That's great, Mike." She said. "I can't wait."

"I miss you." He said. El smiled.

"I miss you, too."

She did. She missed him more than she was willing to admit.

They lapsed into silence. El listened to the sound of his breathing on the opposite end. The phone created a sort of alternate space. He was so near but also so far away, and she felt as if she could reach out and touch him, but she didn't know how. Like there was this veil of static and time and space separating them that couldn't be surmounted. It was like that when she visited him in the void, too. When Hopper kept her hidden and Mike radioed her on the supercom every day and poured his soul into the blackness and the static. And she could see him and touch him and listen to him even though he couldn't see her or feel her or hear her, and there was this trench between them they couldn't cross. She hated it then and she hated it, now. Of course, nothing was stopping her from getting in the car and driving to Indianapolis, right now. Well, nothing except the soul-sick guilt eating her from the inside out.

"I gotta go, El." Mike said, disrupting her thoughts. "See you soon." He hung up, and the line went dead. She kept the phone pressed to her ear, letting the static fill her up, drowning out all the noise, until she felt tears begin to roll down her cheek and fall into her lap. She hung up the phone and pulled her knees to her chest, feeling sluggish and disoriented, like when you fall asleep midday and wake up in the evening, and time feels like thick syrup. She ran a hand through her

hair, and her thoughts wandered, returning to the conversation she knew she'd have to have. Mike wanted to show her the campus. And she was planning on showing him that little plastic stick that turned her world upside down in the space of three minutes. And then where would they be?

"Hey, Mike, I'm glad everything's working out for you. The campus is beautiful. By the way, you got me pregnant, so now you have to drop out of school so we can raise a kid together. Sound good?"

Yeah, no.

She laughed through her tears. The sound was humorless, like broken glass. She tried to imagine a better way to say what she knew needed to be said. Nothing was forthcoming, so she tried to put the whole thing out of her mind.

She changed into her pajamas and climbed into bed, though the clock's red, digital numbers read 8:34 p.m. Lying in the semi-darkness, she slipped a hand beneath her shirt, so it rested over her abdomen. In the quiet moments, safe and out of reach of prying eyes, she let her guard down. She allowed herself to devote some attention to the baby.

The beginnings of a consciousness stirred alongside hers. Over the last two days, she'd gotten better at picking it out among all the background noise. It was faint, fuzzy around the edges, but she learned to recognize when it was more active, when it was subdued, like it might be sleeping. Like it might be dreaming. El closed her eyes, tracing lazy circles over her skin. She pressed the pad of her fingertip over her belly button.

"What're we gonna do?" She asked. Her child was roughly the size of a bean, yet she already shared an intimate connection to it that transcended anything she could've expected. She already felt a primordial, powerful urge to protect it. Loved it, even.

Lying there, she thought maybe it wasn't so scary, after all. Maybe it wasn't the end of the world.

El rapped on the door. She couldn't figure out what to do with her hands. She twisted them, nervously, then shoved them in her pockets, squaring her shoulders as footsteps sounded inside the dorm. Mike opened the door, and before he could say two words to her she'd launched herself into his arms. Their lips met, and then they were kissing. He fisted his hands in her hair, fingers splayed across her jaw, and she shivered. She leaned into the kiss, hands curled and resting on his chest, giving and taking and asking and granting. They broke apart.

"Hey." He said.

"Hey." She gasped, out of breath. She looked at him, drinking in every detail of his face. He looked good. His eyes were bright and clear, cheeks stained pink. He looked so comfortable in his skin. Her heart fluttered in her chest, and she felt a familiar, swoopy feeling low in her belly, like a free-fall. He still made her feel like a giddy little girl with a crush, after all these years.

"Wanna come in?" Mike said, cheeks flushing. He took her bag, stepping aside. She stepped over the threshold, glancing around the room. It was small, with two beds, two desks, and a cramped, little closet. A stack of textbooks sat at the foot of his bed. His desk was cluttered with notebook and a couple crumpled pieces of paper. An IU pinup accompanied the rest of his old movie posters, which he'd pinned to the wall, above his bed. There were a handful of photos had been taped up, as well. One of Nancy and Holly, a candid shot of her, laughing at something, one of the entire party, taken in the summer of 1985. She smiled, tracing the edge of the photo with her fingers, studying in their smiling faces, ice cream cones in hand. The dorm was a change, no doubt, but the pieces of their lives were still there. It was just a change of scenery. She liked it.

Mike wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

"What d'ya think?" He asked. El smiled.

"It suits you."

He grinned, pressing a kiss between her eyes.

"C'mon, you hungry? There's a really good pizza place downtown . . ."

She pulled away, looking into his eyes. Her heart crawled into her throat. She'd rehearsed what she'd say to him a thousand times in her head, on the way over. She thought she could delay that inevitable conversation a little longer. She wanted to see the campus. She wanted to visit the places he studied and ate, the places he went with friends and the places he went to be alone. She wanted to experience his new normal. She wanted him to share this piece of his life with her. Telling him about the baby would ruin that, so she'd decided waiting another day wouldn't hurt anyone.

She looked at him, swept away in the riptides of his gaze. All at once she realized all of that was complete bullshit. She couldn't pretend like everything was alright and then drop a bomb on him. She couldn't bring herself to lie to him.

She reached for his hand, took it. She exhaled, shakily.

"We need to talk." She said. Mike eyed her, frowning. She knew he was trying to read her.

"El, what's wrong?"

Unfortunately, he was pretty good at it.

"Let's sit."

He sat on the edge of his bed. She sat beside him.

"El, tell me what's going on. You sounded weird over the phone, and you've missed a bunch of my calls the past few days, and . . ."

In answer, she held out the pregnancy test. Mike's gaze dropped to the plastic stick. She pushed it into his hands. He took it, turning it over.

"What's this?"

El didn't answer. She bit her lip, tears welling in her eyes.

Mike swallowed, lips forming a thin line. She watched the color drain

from his cheeks.

"El, you're not . . ."

She nodded, clapping a hand over her mouth. She couldn't say it.

Mike shook his head. He squinted at her.

"No . . ."

She nodded, again.

"Yes." She choked.

"I don't understand . . ."

She sighed, wiping her eyes.

"It's fairly self-explanatory."

Mike leapt to his feet, running a hand through his hair. He began to pace, and El followed the progression of his feet across the carpeted floor.

"When did you . . ." He trailed off, licking his lips, nervously.

"Monday." She said.

"It's mine?"

El laughed. The question was absurd.

"Yes."

The corners of his mouth twitched, and El studied his face, carefully, watching a hundred different emotions cross his face. Confusion and fear and guilt and joy.

"I'm not asking you to do anything, Mike." She said, quickly. "I just needed to tell you." She sighed. "If you don't want to be a part of it, I understand. It's your choice, and I don't want you to think you have to drop everything because of this, I just—" Mike leaned down and kissed her, stopping her words.

She kissed him back. When he drew away, his eyes were filled with tears. His hand rested over her belly. He looked at her.

"I want to."

"What?"

"I want to be a part of it." He said. "All of it. The pregnancy and the weird cravings and the birth and the diapers and the first steps . . . all of it."

El stared at him, breath snagging in her throat.

"Promise?"

Mike laughed.

"I promise."

The corners of his mouth twitched. He caught her face in his hands.

"El?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

They lay on his bed, wrapped in each other's embrace. Mike played with her hair, combing through her curls with his fingers.

"What are we going to do?" She asked him. Outside, raindrops trickled down the window pane.

"We'll figure it out." He said.

"Your classes . . ."

"Don't matter." Mike finished, cutting her off. "You don't have to face this alone, El."

She looked at him, grateful he was putting on a brave face, for both of them.

"This isn't the only option, you know." She said. A wave of nausea swept over her as she said the words. Even though she knew the definition of family wasn't just the people you were related to, but the people who loved you and stood by you. Even though she knew sometimes people found their way into each other's lives for a reason. Hopper wasn't her biological father, and yet he was the closest thing to a parent she'd ever had. He was more her family than Brenner, or even Terry. She didn't think she could just jump ship like that. She couldn't give her baby up, couldn't risk her baby falling into the hands of someone like Brenner. She couldn't abandon it. She couldn't—wouldn't—let her child grow up in a prison, starved of love. With that thought came the revelation that the baby might turn out just like her. With abilities. With a curse . . . she withdrew from the thought, as if it had burned her, and it pushed it away, into the dark corners of her mind.

"No." Mike shook his head. "We'll be okay, El." He traced his thumb over her cheekbone. "I want to do this right."

She looked at him. She knew he meant it. He wasn't going to leave. He wasn't going to let her fall through the cracks. He wasn't going to let her do this alone. She hated herself, for doubting him. Looking at him, as he watched the raindrops streak across the window, tracing patterns over knuckles, she made up her mind. She wanted that future. She wanted their baby to grow up knowing who its parents were, knowing it was loved and safe. She hadn't had the privilege, and so she was determined to give her baby nothing less than all the love she could possibly give.

She leaned toward him, kissing him slowly and deeply, trying to make him understand everything she was thinking without saying a word. He returned her affections, lips traveling from her mouth to her earlobe to her neck. She hummed in pleasure as he eased her shirt up and planted feather-light kisses on her stomach.

She brushed a hand through his curls, affectionately.

"Does Hopper know?" He asked.

"Nobody knows." She said, cupping his cheek. "Just you."

They fell silent, letting the truth of their secret sink in.

They'd decided to be parents. They'd decided to make this work. Somehow. Though Mike did his best to hide it, El saw a flash of terror chase across his face, and found her own feelings reflected it. She was going to be a mother. The truth of it broke over her head like a wave, threatened to pull her under, and she realized just how ridiculously unprepared she was to be a parent. To be a mom, when she didn't exactly have a model example to guide her through the next chapter. Her mind struggled to piece together a picture of what a mother should look like, how a mother should act, and the person who came to mind was Joyce.

El sat up, hugging her knees to her chest. They were just kids. They shouldn't have to deal with this. It could never work out the way she wanted it to. How could she hope to guide a child through all the ups and downs of life when she'd barely begun to live it? When she felt like little more than a child, herself? They were too young, and she had too many jagged edges and missing pieces. How could she bring a child into the world having seen the monsters that lurked in the shadows?

What if it was like her? Her baby, born with powers. A weapon. A monster.

Mike must've seen it in her face, because he stopped that spiraling trail of thought before it could swallow her, whole.

"El, listen to me." He said. "It's going to be fine. We're not alone. The Chief, my parents, the guys, they're the baby's family, too. And don't think, for a second, that you won't be a good mom, because you will. I know it." He took her hand.

"You're not the monster they made you. How many times do I have to say it until you start believing it?" Mike tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "We'll figure it out. I promise."

El nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat. She wanted to believe him.

3. Chapter 3

El lay in bed, tracing lazy patterns over Mike's knuckles. His arms hugged her close, and his hands rested on her stomach. El wondered if her baby could possibly know how much love already surrounded it.

What did it mean to to love something this much, this tiny thing that was both a part of her and a part of him? She didn't know.

She rolled onto her back, gazing at the ceiling. She tried to picture what their baby might look like. Would it have Mike's eyes, her smile? It didn't matter.

She glanced at the sleeping boy, beside her, heart bursting with all the love she felt for him, for their child. She reached over, brushing a strand of hair from his forehead. He stirred, slightly, eyelids fluttering.

They'd grabbed a bite to eat at the pizza parlor Mike suggested. She realized just how absolutely starving she was. She'd devoured two slices in the space of five minutes.

While she ate, Mike spoke. She listened to him talk about his classes, about people he'd met, and it felt almost normal.

They walked to his dorm, hand in hand, as the chilly, October air swirled around them and fallen leaves danced around their feet.

El liked the city. She liked the activity and the smell and the noise. She liked watching people as they went about their business, popping into shops, smoking on street corners. Unapologetic. She liked the lights, at night. She liked the towering buildings that cut the sky into a thousand pieces. She liked the car horns, the coffee shops, the graffiti. Indianapolis wasn't Hawkins. Maybe that's why she liked it so much.

They walked back to his dorm, hand in hand. They took a shortcut, crossing a courtyard. They passed a fountain. Mike paused, fishing in his pockets, and El caught the glint of a penny as he tossed it into the

water. El watched the coin sink through the water to join the thousands of other coins that belonged to thousands of other people, trying to imagine the thousands of lives and thousands of spaces between moments and the thousands of hopes and dreams and fears of those who'd paused by this fountain, taking the time to toss their one-cent pieces in exchange for a wish. Trying to reconcile it all with this single moment in time, this moment that belonged to them. She tried to imagine their faces.

Her thoughts dissipated as she felt Mike's eyes on her, and she met his gaze, watching his face contort with an emotion she couldn't place.

"What?"

"El?" He asked, in a voice barely more than a whisper. "Will you marry me?"

She said yes before her brain had fully processed the words that had just come out of his mouth. He swept her into his arms, clinging to her so tightly it hurt, tears cutting down his cheeks. She choked back a sob, burying her face in his shoulder, fisting a hand in his curls, watching the street lights dim and the cars and the passerby and the bustle of the city come to a standstill. Riding that rollercoaster, holding on for dear life as it tossed her into a free-fall.

When they returned the dorm, he shut the door and froze, hand resting on the knob. His shoulders shook, and El touched his arm, wordlessly begging him to let her in, to tell her what he was thinking and what he was feeling so they might face it together. He turned, meeting her gaze. His eyes welled with tears.

"I'm sorry." He choked. "I'm sorry it has to be this way."

"Mike . . ."

"I love you." He said. "I think I knew it back in seventh grade, when you broke Troy's arm." He laughed, but it sounded all wrong. "And I'd be a liar if I said I'd never thought about us getting married, someday. But I never imagined it would happen like this. And I'm sorry." His voice broke, and he sucked in a breath, eyes and nose

running.

El embraced him, tears stinging her own eyes. He buried his face in her hair.

"I'm so, so sorry."

All at once, he began to come apart at the seams. She held him while he cried and cried, rubbing his back, wishing she could take his pain away. He clung to her, and everything poured out of him as the dam finally broke.

Tell me what to do.

She asked whatever higher power might be paying attention. But no one seemed to be listening.

Things were so fucked up. And turned backwards. His words chased circles around her skull. She'd imagined proposals, in her head, when she was thirteen and just beginning to understand what all of it meant. When she lived vicariously through soap operas and convinced herself she'd marry Mike Wheeler. But none of those silly daydreams looked quite like this. This was messy, full of loose threads and jagged edges. Upside down and inside out.

At least they had each other.

Mike's sobs quieted, eventually. He wiped his eyes.

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry." She whispered, cupping his cheek. "I'm the one who should be sorry."

"No." Mike said, darkly. "You don't have anything to be sorry for, alright?" He shook his head, blowing out a breath. "This is just something that happened, and we'll deal with it." It sounded like he was trying to convince himself, more than anything. El brushed a lock of hair out of his eyes, and he looked at her, attempting to crack a smile.

El wasn't buying it, but she let it slide. In truth, he looked terrified.

Then, he laughed. A manic, deranged sort of laugh. And El found herself laughing, alongside him, and then they were laughing so hard they couldn't breathe. The whole thing was absurd. They'd quiet for a minute, and then one would start in and they'd both dissolve into fits again.

"Stop!" She cried, wiping tears from her eyes. "It's not funny."

And Mike attempted to keep a straight face, which only set her off again.

They changed into their pajamas and climbed into bed, and he'd fallen asleep with his arms wrapped around her waist, hands cupping her stomach. And she drifted off feeling impossibly happy and sad at the same time and wondering how that could be.

They made it through the weekend with minimal hiccups. Mike took her on a tour of the campus. She liked the library best, with its many windows and thousands upon thousands of books—more than a person could read in a whole lifetime. She ran her hand down the spines and turned them over in her hands, thinking she'd gladly accept the challenge. She loved to read. She loved the way she could read a story and see the little squiggles of ink on the page become vivid pictures on her head. She liked thinking about the authors of those stories describing the pictures they saw in their own heads, liked to imagine the story defying the laws of space and time to end up in the reader's—nothing short of telepathy. She like to take her time with books. Large, complex words still caught her off guard, on occasion, a struggle resulting from the holes in her education.

"How long do think it would take person to read all these books?" She asked Mike. Wrinkles appeared between his brows as he worked it out in his head, eyes sweeping the rows of shelves.

"A really really long time." He offered, and El rolled her eyes.

"No shit, Sherlock."

They got coffee at the little cafe on the corner, in front of Mike's building. A they waited in line, Mike's friends greeted them. Nick, a

tall, thin redhead, and a short, dark-haired kid named Matt, who kept pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. Mike introduced her as his girlfriend, and she muttered a polite 'hello', absently tugging at her sleeve. They made small talk, finished their drinks, and bid Mike and El goodbye.

"They're pretty cool." He told her, as they sipped their coffee. "But they're not the guys, you know? It's not the same." El nodded. She knew. Nobody would ever truly understand what they went through, what they saw. Nothing would ever come close to the family they'd built for themselves.

El left Monday morning. They walked to the parking lot, hand in hand, and then Mike embraced her. And she started crying, because her moods were a little unpredictable at the moment and she didn't know the next time she'd see him and she dreaded returning home with this secret trapped inside. But she wasn't sharing the burden alone, she reminded herself, as she clung to him. The revelation didn't make her feel any better. Just thinking about the inevitable moment she'd have to tell Hopper was enough to make her feel sick. Here, at least, she was able to put a little bit of distance between her and that conversation. But she didn't know how long she'd last, back in Hawkins. She didn't know how much longer she could go on looking him in the eye and telling him everything was fine.

"No more secrets between us." He'd said, after she'd broken down and told him about Kali and her trip to Chicago. How she'd joined Kali on her escapade and almost murdered Ray, the man who'd fried her mama's brains past the point of no return. He'd held her while she cried, pouring her little heart out, confessing everything like some horrible secret. He'd comforted her and held her, and after she'd pulled herself together he'd proposed a kind of truce. A compromise. No more secrets. It wasn't like he wasn't guilty. He'd kept his fair share of secrets from her, too. But she was willing to let it go if he did the same. For El, who'd adopted *friends don't lie* as a kind of motto, liked the idea. And it worked, for a while. Maybe she didn't tell him when she had a drink or two at some party or other. Maybe she didn't tell him when she and Mike had ventured into the realm beyond just kissing. The first time they'd ever had sex. Maybe she didn't tell him everytime she snuck out her window, or confessed to every stolen

cigarette, or told him about that time she'd punched a girl in the face for picking on Will, and then Jedi mind-tricked her way out of detention. But she didn't keep secrets when it counted. She told him when she was hurting. When she needed advice, or a shoulder to cry on. And he did the same. And it worked. They had their ups and downs. Sometimes there was screaming. Sometimes things flew across the room. But they always picked up the pieces, and in the end, she loved him like a father. And he loved her like a daughter. And everything worked out. But this . . . this was uncharted territory.

"If you need me, call me." Mike said, pulling back.

"Okay."

"I'm serious, El." He caught her face in his hands. "If your hormones or crazy, or you need pickles and apple sauce at three o'clock in the morning, call me."

That made her laugh. He leaned down and kissed her.

"I love you."

"I love you, too." She said. She climbed into her car. He waved at her, face screwed up against the morning light, the toes of his Chuck-Taylor's hanging off the edge of the sidewalk. She waved back, then pulled out of the parking lot and onto the street.

They'd agreed he should stay in Indianapolis, at least for the time being. They had plenty of time to figure stuff out. In the meantime, he'd figure out how to tell his parents, and she'd tell Hopper, and they'd go from there. It seemed as good a plan as any, at the moment. It wasn't like they could hide this from their parents for much longer, even if they wanted to. She was pregnant. In a few months, she'd actually look the part. She just needed to figure out the right time to tell him.

It wasn't doing her any good to worry about it, right now, so she tried her best to put it all out of mind. She pulled onto the highway, tapping her fingertips on the steering wheel, humming along with the radio.

El wasted her afternoon at the mall. She'd wrestled with a rising tide of irritation all morning, until it bubbled to the breaking point and she'd screamed at the intern for putting a case file in the wrong folder. Flo ended up letting her off early, to get her out of the office for everyone's safe. El accepted the offer, grabbing her coat and marching out the door. Steve, rain-drenched and heading toward the station, bumped into her in the parking lot, but she just bid him a hurried hello got in her car, speeding away. She popped in and out of a handful of stores, buying a sweater and a pair of boots for herself. She'd eaten an early lunch, so she bought herself a warm pretzel and nibbled on it as she walked.

She'd noticed more symptoms of the pregnancy in the past week or two. She was either hungry or tired or annoyed, usually all three at once, all the time. Not to mention the nausea that overcame her whenever someone walked by wearing a particularly strong perfume, or that time Cal brought a tuna sandwich for lunch. She'd rush to the nearest bathroom to puke her guts out. And don't even get her started on the discomfort surrounding her swelling breasts. She battled with her bra on a daily basis—it constantly bugged her, and she swore the moment she got home and took it off was the single best part of the day. It never failed to draw a sigh of relief out of her.

She told Mike all of this during their daily phone calls. Sitting in bed, telephone cord wrapped around her finger, she reported it back to him, the good and the bad. The ups and downs. Because he'd insisted on being a part of it, and she intended to hold him to that promise. He sympathized with her the best he could and some days, they could even laugh about it.

"How was Halloween?" Mike asked.

"Boring." She sighed. "I snuck some candy from the stuff we were giving out, and then Hop caught me and I had to listen to him lecture about calories and blah blah blah. He keeps complaining about the extra ten pounds he's gained ever since Steve started bringing a box of doughnuts for the whole department every morning. Kiss-ass." El scoffed. "I told him it's cliché, but he thinks it's funny. Anyway, Hop eats a dozen donut holes, then makes a big deal out of me eating a few pieces of candy on Halloween, like I'm the one putting on the pounds." She rolled her eyes, listening to Mike's laughter,

accompanied by a burst of static, on the other end.

"Well, you're eating for two, so you've got a pretty good excuse."

"Even if I wasn't, I can't resist Halloween candy. Especially Snickers."

"Snickers? Really?"

"It's the best, hands down. Don't fight me on this."

"Mmm, I disagree."

"What?" She yelped. "You can't beat chocolate, caramel, and peanuts."

Mike didn't respond. El sat up.

"Michael Wheeler, tell me there is not a single type of candy on this planet that's better than a Snickers bar."

"There is, actually." He said. "Twizzlers."

"Gross. They taste like plastic."

"They taste like heaven."

She was grateful. Their conversations dulled some of the anxiety that sat in the bit of her stomach, festering like an open wound. Because she hadn't told Hopper yet, and she was starting to think worrying about the thing was worse than the thing itself, and she'd be better off to grit her teeth and get it over with. Nowadays she walked around with her lungs squashed into a tube, struggling for breath. The guilt and anticipation weighed on her, more than ever, and she was grateful to distribute some of the weight onto Mike's shoulders, whenever he called. Still, it wasn't the same as actually having him there, with her, which was what she wanted more than anything. She missed him a whole lot, lately.

El returned home, shopping bags in hand, and went up to her room. Hopper hadn't returned from the station, and so she changed into sweatpants and a t-shirt, finally, wonderfully braless, and went into the kitchen to get a snack. She grabbed a cup of yogurt from the fridge and settled herself on the couch to watch a *Days of Our Lives*

rerun. She fell asleep wrapped in blankets, until the sound of the squeal of the front door's hinges woke her. She stifled a yawn, blinking at Hop as he stomped through the door, shrugging his raincoat off, and asked what she wanted for dinner.

El wasn't expected at the station, today. She spent the day at home, enjoying the house to herself. She put a vinyl on the turntable and cranked the volume up with a flick of her head. She fished in the bathroom cabinets for a bottle of nail polish and painted her toes bright purple. She made a grilled cheese sandwich for herself. She started the third installment of a trilogy about the colonization of Mars, until she grew bored and set the book down, stifling a yawn.

She'd endured a fitful sleep, last night, her slumber plagued with strange nightmares. She couldn't piece together the fragments of dreams to make sense of them, but she can't rid her mind of the sound of a baby, crying. She remembers the desperation, the panic, filling her up as she heard that sound and searched for the baby. A baby, without its mother. She couldn't find it. It was just black, so dark she couldn't see her hand when she held it inches from her face. So dark she couldn't tell if she was upside down or rightside up, couldn't tell if she was moving forwards or backwards or stuck somewhere in between. She'd woken to a dampened pillow and salty tears sliding down her throat. She'd wept in her sleep.

Now, El lay on the sofa. She eased her shirt up, pressing two fingers over the expanse of skin below her belly button. She felt bloated and swollen. She didn't yet have a bump, of course, but her abdomen felt full and solid, like a water balloon. She stretched, standing up, and headed toward the bathroom. She had to pee. Again. When she finished, she ventured into the kitchen for a glass of water. A knock on the door interrupted her wandering thoughts, and she went into the entryway to answer it.

Joyce stood on the porch, carrying a couple plastic chairs.

"Hey, sweetie." She said, smiling. "I wanted to drop these off. I called Hop, at work. He said you'd be home."

El grinned. "Sure, I'll take them off your hands." She said, reaching to

relieve Joyce of the burden. She propped them up against the opposite wall. They'd lent Joyce a couple chairs for a Halloween party for the staff at Melvald's.

"Wanna come in?" El asked.

"Sure, just for a minute. I've gotta be at Melvald's in an hour. I'm covering."

El led her inside, putting a teapot on the stove. Joyce took a seat at the kitchen table, twisting her hands, and El sat across from her.

"Are you enjoying the peace and quiet?" El asked. Joyce laughed.

"Yes, I certainly am. It gets lonely, some days. Others it's nice to run a nice bath and relax. Easier to cook for one."

"Well, they'll be home in a few weeks." El said, touching the older woman's hand.

The whole party would be home for Thanksgiving. El had been counting the days. She'd seen Mike, of course, and Dustin had visited home, once, for a weekend. Max and Lucas, however, were in California, and Will was in New York, so she hadn't seen a whole lot of them. She received plenty of phone calls from all of them, but it wasn't the same. It wasn't the real thing. It didn't come close to the warmth, the safety, she felt, enveloped in their presence. The way she felt when all of them squeezed into the blanket fort in Mike's basement, telling ghost stories by flashlight, and she fell asleep with several different limbs poking her in the ribs, and the air was at least seventy-percent Dustin's farts, but she didn't care, because they were her family and they were all so close and safe and all hers. Or the times they all piled into Steve's car, and they drove through Hawkins late at night, speeding down empty roads, singing along to the radio. Or all those summer days they wasted swimming in the quarry, splashing one another, climbing up to the ledge on the cliff face and leaping off, watching the water rush up to meet them. A phone call wasn't the same. It didn't beat the countless memories and fragments of time she kept buried inside and locked with a key. It didn't chase away the loneliness.

"You look tired, hon." Joyce said. "You feeling alright?"

"Yeah." El lied. "I'm fine. Really."

"You're sure?"

El looked at her. Joyce's eyes, which were so light they were almost golden, like caramel, cut into El. She found herself squirming under a gaze that saw right through her, finding the weaknesses and widening the cracks, because Joyce knew all about pain. She'd been in pain all her life.

El cast her eyes away, running a fingernail up the grain of the wound. Joyce touched El's hand.

"Honey, you can talk to me." Joyce said, gently. "Are you alright?"

El pressed her lips together, trying to ignore that terrible ache in her chest-pain that seemed almost unbearable, all of a sudden. And El felt herself beginning to come undone. She took a breath, then burst into tears.

"Oh, sweetheart." Joyce said, jumping out of her chair. Her arms encircled El's shoulders, and El clung to her, sobbing. Joyce held her, while she cried, and El couldn't stop the tears from coming. She mopped at her eyes, furious with herself. They were the kind of tears that got all stuck in your throat, and you couldn't talk or breathe, you just choked on them. They were the kind of tears that hurt.

Joyce stroked her hair, whispering soothing words against her temple, and El made futile efforts to pull herself together. Eventually, she'd calmed down enough to get words out, and then everything came spilling out into the open.

"I'm pregnant."

There, she'd said it. There was no taking it back, now.

"What?" Joyce asked. El couldn't meet her eyes. She wiped her nose with her sleeve.

"Oh, honey." Joyce gasped, clapping a hand to her mouth. El's eyes

flicked to her face, saw the look of horror, there. It was enough to prompt a fresh wave of tears.

"Oh, honey . . ." Joyce said, again, enfolding her, once more, and El clung to Joyce, feeling like a child.

"I'm sorry." She muttered.

"Why are you sorry?" Joyce asked, smoothing down her curls. El didn't answer. Joyce took a seat, opposite her. She took El's hand, enfolding it in both of hers.

"Does Hopper know?"

She shook her head.

Joyce smiled, a sad, adult kind of smile.

"He needs to know."

"I know."

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay." El said. She wiped her eyes. "Just tired and hungry." She sighed. "And moody."

"That's normal." Joyce said, and laughed. "You know, if it makes you feel any better, I got pregnant with Jonathan when I wasn't much older than you. I wasn't married. " Joyce sighed. "I dropped out of college. Lonnie wanted to get married, because of the baby. I can't stand him, now, but I did love him, once. It takes a toll on a relationship, for sure. And if you've got plans, hon, kiss 'em goodbye." Joyce said, half-joking. El stared at her lap, heart sinking. Joyce went on.

"It's beautiful, too. Motherhood isn't always sunshine and rainbows, but it is beautiful. You'll have good days and bad days, but it'll work out, in the end." Joyce squeezed El's hand. "I promise."

El nodded.

"Were you scared?" El asked.

"I was terrified."

El nodded, solemnly, massaging her abdomen. Of all the rollercoaster of emotions she felt within a day, terror tainted all of them, spilling into her nightmares and waking hours, making it hard to breathe.

"Is it Mike's?" Joyce asked. El nodded.

"He's a good kid. You'll be alright." She smiled. "Does he know?"

El nodded, again. They lapsed into silence.

"Thank you." El said, after a while. "This helps. A lot." And it did. She was driving herself crazy, keeping it all inside. Joyce was the closest thing to a mother she'd ever had. It seemed the only fitting that she was the first person El told outside of the people directly involved. Joyce knew what to say and how to act because she'd lived it.

"What did you do when you found out? Did you tell your parents?"

"I put it off until I was four months along. When I told my mom, she kicked me out. I went to live with Lonnie. It wasn't until Will came along that we finally worked it out. Even then, it wasn't the same. She died a month after Will's third birthday. She was a force to be reckoned with, my mother." Joyce sighed. "She couldn't bear the thought of an illegitimate grandchild. It was a disgrace to the family and all that bullshit." Joyce worried her lip. "She wanted me to give it up for a adoption, but I couldn't. Jonathan and I belonged together. I knew it from the beginning."

Joyce looked at El. "But nevermind my mother, El. Hopper won't kick you out. You're his whole world. All he wants is for you to be happy and safe, even if it doesn't seem like it." She smiled. "Don't let anyone tell you how to live your life, El. Don't let anyone tell you what you should do or who you should be. And don't let anyone treat you differently because of this. This is yours. When that kid is born, you're gonna fall in love, and you're gonna fall hard. It's best to just let things work out the way they're supposed to."

Joyce took her hand, brushing a lock of hair behind her ear.

"You're strong and smart and brave. You'll be okay."

El nodded, tears springing in her eyes, clinging to every word. Looking at Joyce, who was so beautiful and strong, the strongest person she'd ever met, listening to her say everything was going to be alright . . . El believed her.

"Thank you." She breathed.

"If you need me, I'm just a phone call away. For anything. Got it?" Joyce touched her cheek. "You're not alone. Don't ever forget it."

A/N: After today, I will be sticking to a one update per week schedule, and I will be posting on WEDNESDAYS! Hope you're enjoying. Drop a review and say hi!

4. Chapter 4

****Contains REALLY MILD sexual content. You have been warned . .

El's conversation with Joyce gave her that extra confidence she needed to finally talk to Hopper. To look him in the eye and tell him everything because it was eating her up inside. And Joyce told her to let the world see who she really was. She was pregnant. She was going to have this baby, and she was going to be a mother. If people didn't like it, screw 'em.

It was harder than it looked.

She sat in the living room, wringing her hands, waiting for him. Her heart thrashed against her ribcage, unrelenting, and crawled into her throat when she heard the unmistakable sound of the Blazer's tires scraping against asphalt. After a small eternity, she heard Hop's car door slam and his footsteps crunching over dead leaves. He opened the door, stopping in the entryway to peel off his coat.

"Hey, El, did Joyce come by? She wanted to drop off some chairs . . ." He trailed off, seeing the look on her face.

"Ellie, what's wrong?"

She opened her mouth, attempting to speak, and no sound came out. She fought for air, eventually gathering her bearings enough to stutter out real words.

"I have . . . I've got something to tell you." She said.

"Okay." He said, slowly. He ventured into the living room, eyes searching her face, gauging her emotional state. There was a space between them, as vast and deep as an ocean. El could see it—the waves, drenching the shag rug in the center of the room, sweeping away the furniture.

She blinked, dizzy, knees threatening to give out as the tide

threatened to pull her head under water. She dropped into a chair, straight-backed and trembling.

"Jesus, El." Hop said. "You okay?" He closed the gap between them, taking her hand. She ran a finger over his knuckles and swallowed hard.

"I'm . . . I, uh . . ." She trailed off, searching for the right words. But none were forthcoming, and it felt all wrong, but if she didn't do this now she didn't know if she'd ever do it, so she grit her teeth and told him.

Hop stared at her, dumbfounded.

"What?" He asked, quietly, dangerously. El went cold.

"I'm sorry." She said, feeling those cracks widening. She watched the terror mold his face like it was made of clay, watched several more lines appear around his eyes and mouth. He looked a thousand years old.

"Jesus." He breathed. He dropped her hand.

"I'm sorry." She sobbed. "I get it if you're mad and you can yell at me and I'm just so, so sorry." She ranted, burying her face in her hands.

Hopper got to his feet.

"Mad?" Hop said, and laughed. For a terrifying moment, everything was silent and still, so silent El could hear her heart beating in her head, and then Hop kicked the coffee table, making her jump. Her breath caught in her throat.

"Fuck." He breathed. "Fuck . . ."

He turned away from her, so she could do nothing but stare at his back and try to muffle her tears.

"How could you let this happen, El?" He said, words measured and quiet.

She shook her head.

"I don't know." She said. "I don't know, I don't know. I'm s-sorry . . ."

"This is irresponsible, and . . . just . . . fuck . . ." Hopper breathed. "This isn't happening."

El said nothing, cheeks burning. Still, he wouldn't look at her, and that was the worst part. The thing that told her she'd screwed up so, so badly, because he couldn't even bring himself to look his daughter in the eyes. She hated it. She hated this. And she didn't know what to do or how to say what she needed to say without shattering whatever they'd built, over the past five years. This new life he'd given her. She was messing it all up. That revelation was so dangerous and big and dark she couldn't dwell on it. Maybe now she knew what he was talking about, all those years ago, as they prepared to venture into the literal heart of darkness. About being cursed. About living your whole life trying to keep your head above water, only to drown.

The black hole.

It got her.

El stood, drawing herself up.

"Look at me!" She screamed. Across the room, the vase on the windowsill, full of wilting flowers, shattered. Glass sprayed in every direction, bouncing off the window, spilling across the floor. She clenched her fists, chests heaving. Blood stained her upper lip.

"I'm sorry." She said. "I'm s-sorry I'm stupid and careless and irresponsible. I know I'm just a . . . a dumb te-teenager, and I screwed up. You can y-yell at me and hate me as mu-much as you want, but I n-need you to know I'm sorry." She said. "For e-everything. For making your life hell. For being s-stupid, for thinking you could ever love me the way y-you loved Sara, for everything." She choked.

Hop turned, meeting her eyes, and she knew she'd crossed some line. She could see it in his face. His eyes were so full of reproach and grief and pain it made her feel sick. She knew she'd never be able to take back the words that came spilling out of her mouth, and she immediately wished she hadn't said them. Even if she meant them.

"El . . ."

But this time, she was the one who couldn't bring herself to look at him. She'd hurt him. She was the monster. What a mess she'd made.

El did the only thing she knew how. She ran. She pushed past him, tears clouding her vision, and dashed up the stairs. She burst into her room and shut the door, climbing onto her bed and pushing her face into her pillow as the tears fell. After a few moments, she heard his door slam.

Once she'd cried herself out, she lay on her bed with her knees pulled to her chest, aching and tired. Eventually, she mustered up the courage to go down the stairs, knowing she'd broken something. Knowing she'd have to fix it.

She grabbed a dustpan and broom from the garage. In the kitchen, she set about sweeping up the shards of glass, on the floor. She dumped the shards in the trash can, then knelt on her hands and knees, searching for any stray fragments that had found their way into the farthest corners of the kitchen. She fished a large piece from under the refrigerator, and grimaced, inhaling as it clipped and cut her thumb. Blood began to run from the wound, trailing down her wrist. She rushed to the sink, cradling her hand. She ran it under the tap, looking away, queasy, as the water began to turn pink. She heard a sound, behind her, and turned. Hop stood in the doorway, eyes reddened and puffy, and El's stomach did a somersault. He'd been crying. He never cried.

"You alright?" He asked, hoarsely.

"Yeah, it's just a cut." She said, fighting to keep her voice steady. He crossed the room, taking her hand, inspecting the wound.

"It's pretty bad." He said, brows knitting with concern. "Hold on."

He disappeared, for a moment, and returned with a little first aid kit in his hand.

"Let's see . ." He extracted some alcohol swabs. He lifted her and sat

her on the kitchen counter, as easily as he would if she was still a child. He set about cleaning the cut with painstaking care, and El swallowed, hard, fighting tears. The alcohol stung, and she winced. When he finished, he wrapped her thumb in gauze.

"There." He said, nodding. "Better?"

El nodded, face contorting as her walls crumbled. She began to cry.

"Oh, Ellie." He said, weakly. He enfolded her in his arms. She slumped against him, fisting a hand in the folds of his collar, trying to keep the tears at bay. He smelled like tobacco and rain and everything familiar. He

"El . . ." He repeated.

"When did you find out?" He asked, voice tight and thick. He was crying, too. That made it worse. That was a hundred times worse. She almost preferred the yelling, because at least that was charted territory. He'd get mad and she'd get mad and they wouldn't talk for a day or two and then he'd make her a Triple-Decker Eggo Extravaganza. It was how they worked things out. He never cried.

"Two weeks ago." She admitted, weakly.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't know." She said, unable to keep the hysteria out of her voice. "I didn't want you to worry. And I thought . . . I thought maybe you'd change your mind . . ." She said, feeling stupid.

"About what?"

She couldn't meet his gaze.

"About wanting me." El said, because that was the best way she could possibly express all the terror that had consumed her. "As a daughter."

"No." Hop said. "Never."

She mopped her eyes.

"I'm sorry."

"It's Mike's, isn't it?" Hop asked, frowning. "Little shit . . ."

El laughed, hiccuping.

"Stop!" It's not his fault."

"Does he know?"

"Yeah."

"And?"

"He says he wants to be a part of it." She said. "We're going to do this together." And he asked her to marry him, which Hopper didn't need to know about. Not yet, anyway. El sighed, inwardly. It was surreal. It still felt like they were just kids playing house.

"What about his classes?"

El shook her head, at loss.

"I don't know." She looked at him. "I don't know what to do."

"You'll figure it out."

"What if I don't?" She said, voice trembling.

"You will." He ran a hand over the stubble on his chin, patting her hand.

"No more secrets. You don't have to hide from me, alright?" Hopper sighed. "There are things I've never told you. Things I've known for a long time that I've never said aloud, and it's so stupid, because I should say them . . ."

He took a breath.

"All that stuff you said about Sara, and about me not loving you, that's all bullshit."

El looked away.

"El, listen to me," Hop began. "You could never replace Sara. She was my daughter, and I loved her. And then she died, and it felt like I didn't want to live in a world without her, anymore. It got bad. It got really bad. But then you came along, and you changed things. You'll never replace her, but you don't have to, alright? It's not a question of who I loved more, okay? That's not how it works." He paused, sighing. "I love you. You're my daughter. Nothing could ever change that."

"Even this?"

"Even this." Hopper smiled, sadly. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner."

El shook her head, eyes brimming with tears.

"I'm sorry, too."

Hopper squeezed her hand.

"Things have a funny way of working out how you least expect. And I guess that day I found you out in the woods, everything just kind of . . . fell into place." He planted a kiss on her forehead.

"And what's all that crap about me not wanting you? You're my daughter. I'm your dad. It's my job to protect you. Did you think I was just gonna throw you out on the streets?"

El nodded, dumbly.

Hopper shook his head.

"Never." He said. "You gave me another shot at being a dad, and I'm not going to mess it up. You and me, we gotta stick together. Alright?"

El hugged him, and his arms encircled her shoulders, holding fast. He drew away, holding her at arm's length. He frowned.

"What?" She asked.

"This is a big responsibility, you know." He said. "Being a parent isn't easy."

"I know." She grimaced.

"I don't want you to think you have to throw your future away with both hands. If this isn't what you want, you've got options. This is your decision."

"I know."

She couldn't give it up. Joyce's voice echoed, in her head. She'd said she knew she and Jonathan belonged together, from the start. El gazed at her lap, not looking at him.

"I'm keeping it."

It was the only thing she was absolutely certain of, amidst all this chaos. Hop nodded.

"It's about time you saw a doctor. We want to make sure it's healthy." Hop said. "I'll make a phone call, if you want."

El looked at him, eyes welling with tears. He squeezed her hand. The weight lifted, then. She hugged him, arms wrapped around his neck, clinging to him.

"Thank you."

They set the appointment for later in the week. El called Mike, telling him about her conversations with Joyce and Hopper and the upcoming appointment. He told her he'd skip class that day to be there, and El's heart fluttered in her chest like a caged bird. Happiness and guilt threatened to tear her in half. She hated to make him miss his class, but she also wanted him there, so they could share this experience. When she voiced this to him, he'd insisted on being there, assuring her his decision had been made and there was nothing she could stay to keep him from coming with her to that doctor's appointment, so she let it rest.

She hung up, relieved to have put the issue to bed. Hopper knew. It wasn't some awful thing she kept hidden inside, any longer. He'd reacted better than she could've hoped, and though it hurt to see him get so upset, she was glad to have his support. In all honesty, she was

going to need all the help she could get. And there were plenty of people she had yet to tell. Mike was waiting to tell his parents until he could do it in person, and they hadn't told any of the party. She imagined that conversation, feeling queasy. She knew they'd support her. Their friendship was more than friendship. It was something else, entirely. Something stronger. They had each other's back, no matter what.

After she got off the phone with Mike, she ran a bath, easing herself into the water. She sighed, closing her eyes. This week had been exhausting, both physically and emotionally. She allowed herself to enjoy the comfort and warmth, pushing all the stresses and fears and dark thoughts into the corners of her mind. She massaged shampoo into her scalp and hummed along to the radio she'd set up on the bathroom counter. She lay on her back, submerging herself, so the music on the radio became washed-out and muffled. She traced a finger across her waistline, taking the time to pick through all the white noise in the void to find that little inkling of a consciousness. It was extremely faint. She didn't even know how it existed, exactly, considering her baby's brain wasn't developed. But it was there, and El marveled at it, at this undeniable, unbreakable connection that existed between her and her child. El projected as much love and comfort as she could over the bridge between them, trying to see into its thoughts and dreams. But everything was just shadows and shapes, blended colors and muffled sounds, like radio feedback. Nothing she could make any sense of. Eventually, she resurfaced. She finished her bath and climbed out, wrapping a towel around her body.

After she'd changed, she found Hop on the porch, downstairs, once she'd put on pajamas. She joined him, outside, shivering in the cold. He looked at her, smiling, and wrapped an arm around her. She leaned her head against his shoulder, gazing at the sky. No words passed between them. They'd said all that needed to be said.

She'd just finished clearing away the remnants of their T.V. dinners from the coffee table, by the sofa, when someone rapped on the door. El tossed the plastic tray in the garbage and brushed her hands on her jeans, going to answer it. She turned the knob, opening the door.

Mike stood on the porch, bag slung over his shoulder, hair properly mussed and falling over his forehead. He grinned, opened his mouth to say something to her, but he trailed off as she launched herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck. He kissed her, lifting her off her feet.

"What're you doing here?" She asked, breathlessly.

"I took off a little early." He shrugged, sheepishly. "Thought I'd spend the night."

She kissed him, again.

"El, who's there?" Hopper called, inside the house, and Mike broke the kiss, paling.

"You've got a lotta nerve, coming here." She teased him.

"Is he pissed?"

"Kind of. But I made him promise not to kill you."

"That's reassuring." Mike deadpanned. She planted a kiss on his jawline, attempting to draw his attention. He smiled, tilting his chin to peck her on the lips, but she knew his thoughts lay elsewhere. His body felt like a wall, tense and unyielding. She rolled her eyes, tugging his hand.

"C'mon."

"He's gonna kill me." Mike said, hoarsely.

"No, he's not."

"He knows we had sex!"

El rolled her eyes, again.

"Mike, that's the least of our worries." She pulled him inside.

"El, who—" Hopper paused, in the entryway, eyeing Mike.

"Hey, Chief." Mike squeaked, flushing.

"You're dead, Wheeler."

"Dad." El warned, glaring at him. She planted herself firmly between them. "You promised."

Hopper shrugged.

"Mike's staying the night." She informed him, casually. "If you need us, we'll be upstairs."

"El . . ." Hop warned. "Watch it. Remember the rules, and, oh what the hell . . ." He trailed off, grimacing, whispering something under his breath that sounded like *the damage is already fucking done* . . .

El rolled her eyes. She seized Mike's hand, and they went upstairs, taking the steps two at a time. He dumped his bag on her bed, and then he crossed the room in two easy strides and pushed his hands through her hair and he was kissing her, and she kissed him back. He pulled back, eyes searching her face.

"How're you feeling?"

"Fine. Better, now that it's out in the open." She said. She meant it. Keeping this secret locked inside had been hell.

He nodded, slowly.

"I wonder how my parents will take it." He said. "My mom will freak, and my dad . . ." He shook his head. "It doesn't matter. Screw them."

"Mike . . ." El began.

"This is all that matters." He said, resting his hands on her hips, stroking her waistline. "You and me and the baby. Nobody else."

He planted a kiss between her eyes.

"That's not true." She said. "We can't do this alone. If your parents don't want any part of it, fine, but we're gonna need help."

"We'll figure it out." Mike said, because that was his answer for everything. And El thought there might be some bravery, a leap of

faith, a kind of *fuck you* in the face of everything, somewhere in those words.

Do you wanna figure it out?

It's what he said when she told him she didn't know how to dance, the night of the Snow Ball. He'd taken her hands and led her onto the dance floor. And then they were dancing, and El knew he was nervous but he didn't let that stop him. He had that same look in his eyes the night he'd kissed her in the gymnasium as their lives fell apart and the sky crashed down around them. He had the same look in his eyes, now, as his fingers brushed over the place where their baby grew with a touch softer than moth's wings. It was that light, that spark, that let her know he'd be there, beside her, through the good and the bad. Through the monsters and the school dances and the sun and the shadows. It was the same look she fell in love with, years ago.

They watched a movie until El fell asleep with her head in Mike's lap. She stirred as he eased off the sofa and went to switch off the T.V. They climbed the stairs and lay in her bed, until Hop's shuffling footsteps ceased and his snores filled the cabin. In the darkness, El reached for him, pulling him to her chest, lips traveling over his neck and jawline. He pulled her shirt off, and she crawled on top of him, until she was straddling his lap, and they were so close they were breathing the same air, taking the time to measure out the spaces between their breaths and heartbeats.

The first time they'd crossed that line, venturing beyond the realm of kissing, she was just shy of sixteen.

In health class, while the rest of the class giggled and blushed and whispered innuendos under their breath, El sat straight-backed in her chair, watching the presentation with rapt attention. She was only just beginning to decipher the boys' complex interactions: their insinuations and jokes and things that sounded like one thing but meant another. She'd heard the word "sex" before, didn't understand why all the adults in her life danced around the concept, why it existed with so many strings attached. She watched her soaps, and she listened in health class, and the information she gathered led her to this conclusion: 1) sex was just a natural thing people did, usually

when they loved each other 2) it was how you made babies, but that could be prevented 3) it felt good 4) she very much wanted to do it with Mike.

This conclusion didn't embarrass her. Not one bit. Not the way it embarrassed him, when she brought it up on a sleepy Saturday morning, as they sat on the sofa in Mike's living room, joined at the shoulder and hip, planning Mike's biggest D&D campaign in all of history.

"Mike, when are we going to have sex?" She asked. Unfortunately, he'd taken a sip of orange juice precisely the same time those words left her mouth, and the juice ended up spraying in every direction as he reeled, trying to process the question. His eyes bulged, and he coughed and spluttered. El thwacked him on the back, and he, with eyes streaming and cheeks stained bright red, recovered enough to respond.

"What?"

"Sex. When are we going to have sex?"

"You . . . you wanna have sex?"

"Yes." She said. Words were a big deal, with El. She didn't use them lightly, and she certainly didn't waste them. She was blunt. She said what she meant. She didn't beat around the bush, and she didn't sugarcoat anything. It was a blessing and a curse.

"Well, uh, we're, um . . ." Mike stuttered. "If you, if you really want to, I mean . . . I want to, too, but only if you do . . ."

"Mike." El said.

"And, I mean, if you want to then we'll figure it out, and I . . ."

"Mike." El said, again, lacing her fingers with his own, stopping his words with a kiss. Her lips nudged against his, tender and soft and so insistent . . . And Mike did one (1) smart thing, that day. He shut up and kissed her back. And she was suddenly, very aware of his body. The feel of his lips, against her own, his knee brushing against her thigh, his fingers splayed across her jaw.

He broke the kiss, thumb moving across her cheek, and she sat back, dizzy.

"I want to, El. And if you want to, we will." He said. "We'll figure it out, alright? We'll figure it out."

A month came and went, then another, before the topic cropped up, again. Sure, Dustin and Lucas made their jokes, and Mike rolled his

eyes and flipped the bird at them and made a big show of leaning down and kissing El full on the mouth, just to prove his point. He let their teasing roll off his shoulders. He was older, now. And wiser. And he didn't give as many fucks. Because they'd grown up too fast, and you didn't go through the stuff they did that week in November, and the year after, without a scratch. Losing El had left Mike with permanent scars. And he was determined to make use of every, single, precious second he spent in her presence. So, he fessed up his feelings, and everyone rolled their eyes, and he and El had fallen into an easy relationship that felt just about as natural as breathing. It was too real, too big to fit into a label. They weren't boyfriend and girlfriend, they were just Mike and El. They were old souls, each one lost without the other, trying to fight their way out of all the monsters and school bullies and weird shit. Together. Mike never left her side if he could help it, and everyone at school pretty much accepted that Mike Wheeler and Jane Hopper were in love. They always had been, always would be. And that was that.

The topic didn't come up again for a long time. When it did, it was El who brought it up. They were in the basement, sprawled on the ragged, old sofa. The fort had been rebuilt; it was bigger, now, so it fit them. A larger, better version of their D&D table completed the ensemble of new additions. The basement became an escape, for them. A place of safety, of comfort. Often, various members of the party dropped in unannounced, looking for a quiet place to study, to de-stress, to find refuge from the week's break-ups and breakdowns, and the nightmares that suffocated them. It was a familiar place. A safe place, for all of them.

Today, it was raining, and the droplets fell outside in a slow, steady rhythm. Mike dozed, and El lay sandwiched between his body and the cushions, brushing his hair back from his forehead, listening to his heartbeat, thudding against her ear. She studied the spattering of freckles across his cheeks, the bridge of his nose. Everything was dark about him. Everything from his thick, dark eyebrows to his darker eyelashes to his coffee-colored irises to his jet-black hair. Everything. Boys weren't supposed to be beautiful. But he was.

Thunder rumbled, overhead, and Mike's eyelids fluttered. He opened them. She leaned forward, pressing her mouth to his, slowly working her way down the column of his neck. His whole body shuddered. He fisted his fingers in her hair, pressing kisses to her brow, her earlobe, her neck. There were suddenly too many layers of clothes between

them, not enough oxygen in the room. He slipped a hand under her shirt, fingers stroking across her skin, raising goosebumps.

"Is this okay?" He asked. She nodded.

"Yes." She said, lips sealing to his mouth, tongue nudging between his teeth.

"Mike?" She asked, between his kisses.

"Mmmm?"

"Let's go to your room."

Mike's cheeks reddened. He knew what she was hinting at. But it was less of a shock, this time around. This time around, he was thinking along the same lines.

"Okay." And he grinned. She laughed. He laughed, too. They stood, and Mike took her hand, leading her up the stairs.

They lay Mike's bed, figuring things out. After, as they lay on the mattress, tangled in the sheets and in each other, sweaty and panting, with no clothes between them, Mike couldn't keep the world's stupidest grin from spreading across his face. When he looked at El, he found she wore a matching one. He pressed a kiss to her forehead, and they fell silent, listening to each other's breaths slowing down, and the rain outside the window, and for the sound of a car door or footsteps on the walk or any sign of impending interruption. But the universe seemed to be giving them a break, for the moment. And so they let themselves enjoy it. The rain. The closeness. The empty house. And each other.

The first time Hop caught them making it out, they'd been sprawled on the living room couch, unworried and unhurried, and they'd gotten a bit carried away when she heard Hop's footsteps.

Hey!" Hopper yelled, shielding his eyes. "Hey, hey, hey, that's enough!"

They sprang apart, hearts racing. Mike's eyes fixated on the floor, an expression of terror and mortification stamped across his face. Blood crept up the his neck and splashed across his cheeks. El, on the other hand, met Hop's eyes with a defiant stare. Her eyes, ringed with black eyeliner, burned holes into him.

If she could actually read minds, she'd know Hopper was thinking any other circumstance, he would've been quite proud (and slightly

concerned) to realize she'd turned out just like him: obstinate, loyal to a fault, and sick of everyone's bullshit.

"What's for dinner?" She asked.

"Uh . . . we're not going to address the elephant in the room?"

El looked over her shoulder, then back at him.

"I don't see an elephant."

"El."

"Dad." She returned, cocking a brow.

Hopper pressed his lips together.

"El, we talked about this. You kids are too young . . . you shouldn't . . ." He trailed off, shaking his head, running a palm over his chin. He blew out a breath, accepting defeat.

"This conversation isn't over."

Mike muttered a hasty goodbye to El, risked a peck on her cheek, and left, Hopper ordered a pizza. A heavy, tense silence hung over the table, and El couldn't ignore it. She picked at the food on her plate, uncharacteristically un-hungry. She glanced at Hop. He downed the last of his beer and pushed his chair back. He folded his arms, glowered at her.

He'd lectured her, and she'd just rolled her eyes. Little did he know, she and Mike had already ventured into *that* territory.

El waited for Hop to finish, bored. All of it was old news. He wanted to keep her safe, wanted to make sure they weren't getting in over their heads. And they weren't. They communicated. And they never, ever did something if either one wasn't comfortable with it. She wanted to tell Hop all this. Maybe it'd help him sleep better, at night. But, no. She didn't. He'd probably freak out. And this was between her and Mike.

"Friends don't lie." Mike told her. "But, sometimes it's okay to leave

out some information. It's okay to keep things between us, you know? It's an exception to the rule. It's a special circumstance."

It was between them and no one else. Their secret. She liked the word. Liked the way it tasted. And she liked the way he felt whenever they did cross that line. She liked the way he filled her up and made her whole. Whether it was in his bed or in the basement or the backseat of her car.

They figured things out, like they always did. And it worked. They worked. Admittedly, more than a pair of sixteen-year-olds probably should, but, hey, they weren't ordinary sixteen-year-olds. They were Mike and El. They were invincible.

She thought about all this as they sank into that slow, steady rhythm, careful not to make a sound. And El hadn't appreciated skin as much as she appreciated it, now. All those contact points along her body that he set on fire. When it was over, he wrapped his arms around her, and she tucked her head where it fit perfectly under his chin so her breath brushed across his neck. Not thinking about tomorrow. Not thinking about the baby or the storm clouds or the big, dark unknown. Losing herself in him and in her slowing pulse and the little bubble of safety and warmth and happiness that surrounded her whenever they were together.

5. Chapter 5

El sat in the waiting room, tapping an irregular beat on the arm of her chair. Mike sat beside her, and their knees touched. He offered her hand and she took it, but it did little to ease the panic boiling in her gut. She hated the hospital. She hated the way it smelled, like bleach and antiseptic and illness. She hated the color, or the absence thereof; the white tiled floor and white walls and white ceiling accentuated the artificial light, and all of it was way too close to home. It reminded her of the lab. El tried to stamp down the bile rising in her throat, the ringing in her ears.

Negative energy surrounded the place. Too many lives had been shattered or torn apart or turned inside out within these walls. It brushed against the edges of her mind like a dark entity, threatening to tug her into the past, into that place she sometimes went, where monsters came out to play and Brenner's voice echoed in her head, planting seeds of doubt and fear and shame in her that she'd spent a lifetime trying to convince herself were lies.

When she was younger, fresh out of the lab, she got these flashbacks. They weren't exactly nightmares, just . . . episodes. They happened at random and without warning, suffocating her, stirring up the dregs of memories and nightmares and monsters that lived inside her head. Fragments of real life that ensnared her, like she was caught in a time loop she couldn't escape.

El remembered lying awake, those countless nights, watching the red numbers on her digital alarm clock climb as the minutes crept by. Sleep evaded her, and she'd stare at the light shining through the crack in the door. The light threw odd shadows over the furniture. She stared at them, until they began to shift and morph, peeling themselves off the wall, claws outstretched, reaching for her. Hot, moist breath rubbed across her face and neck, permeating the air with the sweet stench of wet and decay, dying things.

A familiar coldness would settle in the pit of her stomach, extending to her extremities, her fingers and toes, her earlobes, chasing its way down her spine. She'd struggle against the sheets, which somehow wound themselves around her legs, trapping her. She'd try to scream,

lungs constricting, as the monsters drew closer, lusting for blood.

Eventually, the fight or flight response in her brain would kick in, and she'd muster up the courage throw the blankets off and leap out of bed, bolting down the hall and into the kitchen. She membered the sound of stocking feet whisper across the linoleum floor. She'd stop when her palms hit the edge of the sink and she'd stare into the dark, glistening eye of the drain, pulling breaths of air in through her nose, out through the mouth.

Like we practiced, she'd hear Hop's phantom voice, in the darkness, soothing her. The hammering of her heart against her ribs, her temple, began to slow. She'd turn the faucet on and take a few, deep gulps of water from the tap, and then she'd sink to the floor, pulling her knees to her chest. She kept the water running, letting the white noise fill up the room, choking the voices and static inside her head. She'd try to pinch herself, pressing her palms against her cheeks, trying to stop the shaking in her hands, reassuring herself of her own solidity, her own existence.

These flashes weren't uncommon. She grew older, and they'd happen once a week. They didn't just happen at night, they happened any time of day, usually when something triggered her. Mrs. Mancusi, her psychiatrist, called them "panic attacks". She gave El some additional breathing exercises, taught her to identify the triggers, and prescribed an anxiety medication. El didn't touch the little yellow pill bottle, and it sat in the bathroom cabinet, collecting dust. It made her drowsy, worn-down, and it didn't stop the nightmares or the flashbacks, only prolonged them, locking her inside a terrible dreamland of her own invention.

She still got panic attacks, maybe once or twice a month. They'd never really go away. They' were a part of her, and prescription drugs were a band-aid on a festering wound.

Festering.

The dictionary defined "to fester" as "to undergo decay, to rot".

That's the word Kali used. It cropped up in El's mind, a lot. More than it should. In big, bold print.

Fester.

To rot.

She remembers thinking she might be rotting. She remembers thinking the monsters were eating her insides. They were eating her brain. Maybe she was going crazy. Maybe she was already too far gone.

She'd imagine a zombie version of herself—rotting, skin tinged a sickly green and studded with open sores, lolling, white-coated tongue, bulging eyeballs streaked with veins black as ink, chalky fingernails and organs bulging from the places where her skin has rotted away, completely, revealing a diseased heart, a liver, a lung . .

You have a wound, Eleven. A terrible wound.

That thought was always enough to work her into another state, and she wound up on her hands and knees on that tiled floor, shaking, breaking into a cold, clammy sweat.

And in the heart of those dark, sleepless nights, there'd be heavy footsteps, and the scent of tobacco, and the silhouette of a large man, standing in the doorway.

"Whasthematter?" He'd mumble.

He'd cross to the sink, turn off the faucet, and kneel beside her.

"El? You okay?"

She'd nod, try to tell him she's fine, don't worry, but the words would get lodged in her throat. She'd open her mouth, and, unable to stop the dam in her chest from bursting, melt into tears. Hopper's arms would encircle her slender shoulders, and he'd pull her to his chest, murmuring words of comfort as she sobbed into his shirt, relinquishing the cold, steel knot of fear onto his shoulders.

"I got you, Ellie." He'd say. "I got you."

She'd nod, unable to speak.

"I'm s-sorry."

"El, it's okay." He'd say, voice tinged with exhaustion and sadness and guilt. He'd rub a hand over the stubble lining his jaw, gazing at her. A few more lines would appear around his eyes.

"You don't have to fight it alone, you know. I'm here."

The ache in El's chest would ease, and she'd find the strength to crack a smile. , She'd cup a palm against his cheek, whispering

"Promise?"

"I promise."

Hopper wasn't the only person who could bring her back. Mike was her shoulder to cry on, more often than not. Sometimes, when she lay in the darkness, ensnared in the sheets and in her mind, when she'd wake from a nightmare that was all too real, she'd reach for the super com. Her thumb would find the switch, and she'd cling to it, reaching across the static and the space between them, and he'd always answer. His voice would float through the radio, roughened with sleep, even if it was three o'clock in the morning. Even if they had school the next day, even if she'd already woken him up two times in the last week. He'd always answer, and he'd talk and talk and tell her stories or something interesting he'd read, until his voice obscured everything else, grounding her in the present, and she'd lay with the supercom resting against her chest. Eventually, one of them would fall asleep. Sometimes she drifted away first, letting his voice soothe her into slumber. Other times, his voice would get quieter and slower, punctuated by yawns and long pauses, until eventually he stopped talking altogether, but she could hear him breathing and that was enough.

She wasn't the only one suffering from panic attacks and nightmares. She knew Hopper sometimes woke with the skin of his palms ripped to shreds, he'd dug his fingernails so deeply into them. She knew he screamed for Sara. And sometimes he screamed for her.

Mike's eyes sometimes glossed over, and he'd stare at nothing, lips pressed into a tight line and pale. He'd forget where he was, forget

what he was doing, lost in some bad memory. He kept his supercom by his bedside table, in case she needed him. And sometimes he'd reach out and touch her. If they were sitting at the table, doing homework. If they were in the basement or walking the tracks. He'd reach out and touch her shoulder or her hand or her cheek. If she knew what he was thinking in those stolen moments, tracing patterns over her knuckles or pushing his index finger over place where her pulse beat in her wrist, she'd know he did it to reassure himself she was really there. Because he spent a year trying to decide what was real and what wasn't, convinced he might be going crazy. Going crazy, because he still heard her voice and felt her presence, so near and yet so far away, and no matter how hard he tried he couldn't pull back that curtain. He spent a year denying the possibility that if you stole something from the Upside Down, it required a trade. And El's life was a fair price to pay. So, when she came back, when she stepped through the Byers' front door, hair grown out, eyes painted black, he finally released a breath he'd been holding for so long, he'd forgotten how to breathe. He'd embraced her, clinging to her so tightly, afraid she might slip through his fingers again. He searched her eyes, looking for any sign of the old pain, the fear, she once carried with her. It was still there, but it was less, somehow, and he counted his lucky stars.

Will suffered the most out of any of them. He was always quiet and shy but now he was quieter and shier. He looked sick, sometimes, and pale. He battled his monsters with a set of colored pencils, because that was the only way he knew how. When nightmares plagued his sleep, which was all the time, he didn't scream. He suffocated.

"Jane Hopper?"

El looked up. A nurse in scrubs stood in the doorway, holding a clipboard. El heart dropped through the floor. She stood, and Hop and Mike stood, too, trailing after her as she crossed the room. The nurse stopped them out the door, instructing Hop and Mike to wait outside, so she could have some privacy.

Mike opened his mouth, beginning to protest. He still had trust issues, after everything. El put a hand on his shoulder.

"I'll just be a few minutes." El said.

"I'll call you when she's ready." The nurse assured them. She smiled at El, and gestured down the hall. El squared her shoulders, battling a sharp flare of panic, and made her way down the hall. She tried not to think about the tiled floor, which was so like the lab's floor. Trying not to think that too often she saw blood running across the tiles, a shock of crimson against the white. But the hall seemed to go on forever, and El couldn't stop thinking that it would go on, forever, and her breath got all caught in her throat.

The nurse her into a separate ward, devoted to prenatal care and pediatrics. The walls were pink and trimmed with a floral pattern. The nurse paused outside a door and opened it. She followed the nurse inside.

"Okay, Jane, why don't you change out of your clothes and put this on?" The nurse held out a thin, white gown. El stared at it, nauseated. Her pulse quickened, so it felt like her heart might burst out of her chest and run away. El clutched the table for support, dizzy. She steeled herself and took it, pinching the fabric between her thumb and index finger, trying to minimize the amount of skin it came into contact with. Which was absurd, because she knew she'd have to wear it.

"Honey, are you feeling alright?" The nurse's voice was muffled and a thousand miles away, like El might be listening to her from under water.

"Yes." El tried to say, and the word felt like cardboard in her mouth. "Yes, I'm fine."

"Okay, well, go ahead and put that on. In the meantime, I'll let Doctor Simmons know you're here. She'll conduct the check-up. Okay?"

El nodded.

The nurse left, and El folded the gown in a neat little square and lay it on the examination table. She slumped to her knees, sucking breaths of air in through her nose, until her pulse slowed and her equilibrium returned. Slowly, she got to her feet, pulling her shirt

over her head. She tossed it on the chair, by the door, then unbuttoned her jeans, letting them fall to the floor unceremoniously. She put on the gown, hating the way it felt against her skin—alien and cold.

Deep breaths. In through the nose, out through the mouth . . .

She repeated it, over and over in her head. It helped, a little.

She settled herself on the exam table, legs dangling. She knotted her fingers together, glancing around the tiny exam room, at the surgical masks and the rubber glove dispenser on the wall, the floral wallpaper, the corkboard on the wall, where hundreds of pictures were pinned up, each one of them containing a different, smiling child. El slid off the exam table and stood by the board, looking at the pictures. Not for the first time, she wondered what theirs might look like. Someone rapped on the door as she gazed at a pudgy, blond baby dressed in a little red bowtie, for a holiday outing. The door opened, and a middle-age woman with blond hair and glasses stepped inside.

The woman smiled, offering her hand.

"Hello, Jane. I'm your doctor, Alicia Simmons." El shook her hand.

"You'll be visiting me for all your appointments during your pregnancy. I know this is a scary time for you, so I'm going to try my best to ease some of your concerns. If you have any questions, today or anytime, feel free to ask me." She said, warmly.

"First, I'm gonna ask you a couple of questions, and your job is to answer them the best you can, sound good?"

El nodded.

Simmons clicked her pen, ruffling the sheets of paper she'd pinned to her clipboard.

"When was the first day of your last period?"

El told her. Simmons asked about her lifestyle, her medications, her eating habits, if she drank or smoked, if she'd ever visited the OB/

GYN, everything. When Simmons started to question El's family history, she just said "I don't know. I was adopted." Simmons left it at that.

When El answered what felt like a million questions, Simmons led her in the hall to measure her height, weight, and blood pressure, making notes on her clipboard. She took blood, tying a band around her upper arm and swabbing a section of her inner elbow with a cotton ball soaked in antiseptic. El wrinkled her nose as the scent stung her nostrils.

"This might pinch." Simmons warned, and inserted the needle. El winced. El watched the vial fill with blood, until the sight began to make her feel nauseous, so she looked away.

After she'd undergone the preliminary tests, El followed Simmons to another room, one with machine hooked up to a computer monitor next to a big, cushion chair .

"I'll do an ultrasound today, just so we can get a good look at things." Simmons explained. "Get comfortable."

She left, and El lay back, fingers tracing patterns on the edge of the armrest. After a minute or two, Simmons returned with Mike and Hop in tow. El sat up, and Mike crossed the room, leaning down to plant a kiss on her forehead.

"How'd it go?" He asked, gently.

"Fine." She assured him. She looked at Hop. His lips formed a thin line. He met her eyes, gaze clouded and distant. There was a certain sadness written there, and seeing it made her gut tie itself in a knot. He stood by the door, leaning against the wall.

"Alright, now that we're all here, I thought I'd go over some of the things Jane can expect during the next four weeks of pregnancy, and beyond." Dr. Simmons took a seat by El's bedside, facing her.

"Fatigue is common. You'll sleep more, you'll tire easily. This'll continue for the rest of your pregnancy. Nausea is common, also. Your body is still adjusting to the new developments, so you're

hormones may be completely out of whack. You should expect sudden changes in mood, maybe varying sleep patterns and increased anxiety." Simmons told her. "You may have to use the bathroom more often, and your blood pressure is changing, so it's normal to experience dizziness. Especially when standing up or sitting down." Simmons explained. El nodded.

"Right now, you don't need any extra calorie intake. In the second trimester, you'll need about three-hundred extra calories, and towards the end you'll need around four-hundred fifty. The most important thing is to stay fit and healthy. You should be exercising and managing a nutritious diet. Legumes and dairy products are important, so I suggest lots of milk, yogurt, beans, peanuts, and stuff like that. No drinking, no smoking. Limit your caffeine intake, also. Any questions?"

El shook her head.

"Good. I'm sending you home with a pamphlet that covers the first trimester in depth. I think it's a good idea to purchase a book on pregnancy, as well, so that you can track your baby's development. It will give you a more in-depth explanation of the things I've mentioned, today."

Simmons looked around at all of them.

"Ready for the fun part?"

Mike nodded. El caught his eye, and he offered an encouraging smile. Underneath it all, though, he looked just as terrified as she felt.

Simmons turned around, in her chair, pressing a button on the machine. It hummed, and the lights began to blink. The monitor lit up, to a blank screen. She put on a pair of surgical gloves and grabbed a small, plastic bottle from the shelf.

"Alright, Jane, go ahead and lift your gown, for me." El did.

"It's cold." She warned, as she squirted a palm-full of clear gel onto El's midriff. El winced, gooseflesh crawling over her skin as the gel came into contact with it. Simmons grabbed a little device connected

to the monitor and pressed it over El's abdomen, applying a light pressure. Slowly, El lifted her eyes to the monitor.

At first, it was hard to see much of anything. It just looked like a patch of white, grainy film—television static. Simmons traced the device across her abdomen, looking for the baby. Lower, further to the left . . .

"There." She said, and tapped the keyboard, freezing the picture. El looked at the monitor.

Her baby.

She could see where it's head was, could see the heartbeat. Tears welled in her eyes. She clapped a hand over her mouth, the lump in her throat so big and painful it was hard to get any air. She reached for Mike's hand and clasped it, so hard her knuckles turned white. She watched the terror and awe cross his face, as he looked at the monitor. And El felt like she'd been tossed into a free-fall, once again. Her head spun, and tears streamed down her cheeks, and all she could think was that she loved him and she loved their child and she wouldn't let anything happen to either of them as long as there was breath in her body. Mike looked at her, finally, tearing his eyes away from the screen, mouth ajar. He squeezed her hand.

"We made that." He said, in a hushed voice. "Holy fuck."

She giggled, through her tears. Simmons smiled

"Congratulations!" She said. El smiled. "

"It looks like you're just over ten weeks along. Your baby is about an inch and a half in length, the size of a strawberry. It's growing rapidly, at this point. It's size will double in the next few weeks. While it grows, your uterus stretches, to accomodate. That's when you'll start getting a bump. Most first-time moms start showing around the fourth month, but every pregnancy is different."

"If you look right here, you can see it's hand . . ." She typed something into the keyboard, and the image enlarged. "Yes, this is your uterine wall, and this is fluid . . ." Simmons explained, pointing.

"It's heart's beating at about one-hundred sixty beats per minute. See . . ." Simmons traced the trembling line tracing across the bottom of the screen, measuring out the pulse in little ridges and dips.

El nodded, still staring at the monitor. Simmons unfroze the image, so El could see the tiny heart fluttering and the image shifting, lightening and darkening, as she breathed.

El glanced at Hop. She knew he wasn't pleased in the slightest, but she thought she saw a bit of awe, a little bit of something else . . . something like love, in his eyes, and El knew they'd be alright.

"You're gonna be a grandad." She told him. Hop scoffed.

El returned her attention to the monitor.

"I'll have this information stored in your records. We'll let you know your other test results. You'll be receiving a call from us in a few days. In the meantime, minimize stress, rest often, and watch your diet. If you have any questions, feel free to call."

Simmons shut off the machine. She wiped away the gel with a paper towel, and El let the gown fall, covering her abdomen.

"We're done. I'll let you get dressed. You should schedule the next visit about four weeks from today." Simmons said, and smiled. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Jane." She said, shaking El's hand. El smiled.

"Thank you." She said. "For everything."

Simmons left. El got to her feet, and Mike walked her down the hall, so she could retrieve her clothes.

"We're having a baby." He breathed, as if he couldn't quite believe it. She nodded. Mike shook his head, running a nervous hand through his hair. "Hearing it is one thing, seeing it . . ."

"Is something else, entirely." El interjected, and Mike nodded. They lapsed into silence. El watched her feet as they walked down the hall.

"Hey." Mike paused, and she turned, cocking an eyebrow. He stepped toward her, holding her shoulders. "We're gonna be okay."

"I know."

In the waiting room, Hop spoke with the woman at the front desk. El and Mike waited, holding hands, lost in thought.

"Jane!"

El turned, toward the voice. Simmons approached her, shoving an envelope into her hands.

"I thought you might like a copy of baby's first picture." She said. El turned the envelope over in her hands, then opened it. Inside, she found two copies of the ultrasound. The corner of El's mouth twitched, heart crawling into her throat.

"I'll see you in a few weeks, okay?" Simmons said, touching her shoulder. El nodded.

"Thank you." She tried to say, but her words got stuck in her throat. Simmons turned, leaving the waiting room. El watched her go, then turned to Mike. She offered a copy of the photo, and he took it, fingernail tracing the edge. He shook his head, smiling—a big, stupid sort of smile. He looked at her.

"Holy shit, El." He said, waving the photo. "That's our *kid*."

El rolled her eyes, taking the picture and examining it, trying to reconcile the tiny life she carried inside her with the image in her hand, knowing she held something precious.

On the way home, they got lunch at a diner on the corner. The conversation bouncing between them was almost non-existent. The tensions between Mike and Hop were tangible, and El tried to dispel some of the dead air by making small-talk, which didn't work, because El wasn't a big conversationalist, either. She was out of her element, and she knew it, so she just kept making comments about the weather and the food.

She wished Hop would stop staring daggers. She knew he meant well, but he and Mike hadn't always gotten along. They tolerated one another, for her sake, but El knew Mike had never really forgiven

him for keeping El hidden for an entire year, even if he understood the necessity. They were both stubborn and hot-headed, in the best of times. They were more alike than either of them realized. El knew each one of them wanted what was best for her, and sometimes their opinions on the matter conflicted. On top of it all, all three of them were digesting the fact that they'd just seen live footage of Mike and El's unborn child. And each of them were handling it a little differently. So, yes, tensions were high, but El was too tired to play devil's advocate, so her meager attempts at conversation fizzled out.

They ate in silence, and Mike's knee kept brushing against hers, under the table. She kept going over the last hour in her head, her mind again and again returning to the sight of their child's heartbeat. It was so tiny, so fragile, and yet it seemed like the strongest thing. A whole life-force. And El struggled to fathom it. A human being was living inside her, growing rapidly, conscious and whole—a person. The fact that she could sense it, in the void and in spaces between thoughts, proved that. It was surreal.

Hop put down his fork with a clang, startling El out of her thoughts. He wiped his mouth with a napkin and summoned the waitress, asking for a check.

During the ride home, El fiddled with the radio, searching for a song to fill the silence.

Mike planned to stay the rest of the weekend, and El didn't work weekends, which gave them forty-eight hours together. Hop left for the station, leaving them alone. They wasted the afternoon. They lay on the couch, snuggled against one another. Mike pored over a play he had to read for his advanced English class, and El thumbed through the pamphlet Simmons had given her, reading about the first trimester of pregnancy, until her eyes grew heavy and she set it aside, yawning. She lay her head on his chest, picking at a loose thread in the old Hawkins High sweatshirt he wore. He brushed his fingers through her curls.

"What does your pamphlet say?" He asked, gently.

"Nothing new" El said, stifling a yawn. "I'll be tired and moody and blah blah blah."

"Your doctor's right. There's plenty of books out there. We should get one, so we can track her development."

"Her?"

"I'm tired of saying 'it'." He said, sheepishly. "Plus, I think it's a girl."

El opened her mouth, closed it, thinking it over.

"A girl." She repeated. "What makes you think that?"

"No reason." Mike said, shrugging.

"I think it's a boy." El said, trying and failing to conceal a grin.

"Are you just saying that to disagree with me?"

"Maybe."

"I'm not buying it. You probably already know. You probably can talk to it with your psychic powers."

Mike's smile disappeared, at the look on her face.

"Wait, can you?"

"No." El said. "I can't talk to it. But I can . . . sense it, in a way."

Mike sat up, eyebrows disappearing under the cascade of dark locks falling over his forehead.

"And you were planning on telling me this *when*?"

El shrugged.

"I wasn't trying to keep it a secret. It just never came up."

Mike rolled his eyes. He fell silent, lost in thought.

"What's it like?" He asked, after a while.

"It's really hard to describe." She said. "It's like sometimes I can sense other people's thoughts or moods, you know, without meaning to. But

those are brief, like snapshots. This is different. It's always there, like it's a part of me, but it's not. I don't know . . ." El sucked on her bottom lip, trying to find the right words. "It's like you know that article we read in English, last year, about the guy who lost his leg but he can still feel it, sometimes? Like there's an itch he can't scratch?"

"A phantom limb."

"Yeah." El nodded. "It's like that. I get colors and shapes, like a bunch of blurry images that don't make a lot of sense. It's how I found out. Before I even took the pregnancy test, I felt it."

Mike gazed at her, awed.

"So, it's a boy?"

"I don't know. I can't tell."

"Promise?"

El rolled her eyes.

"Promise."

Mike sat up, stretching.

"My life is weird." He said. "You're weird."

"Thanks?"

They lapsed into silence, again.

"We should go somewhere." Mike said, after a while.

"Where?"

"Dunno." He shrugged. "Anywhere."

They ended up grabbing a blanket and some PB&J sandwiches and headed to the junkyard. Mike drove, and El hummed along to the radio. At the junkyard, they went into an old, abandoned bus with broken windows, climbing through the exit door on the roof, and sat

on top. El spread the blanket out so they could sit on it, then settled herself cross-legged next to Mike. She breathed a sigh of relief. It felt good to be out here, in the fresh air, away from everything else. From the top of the bus, they had a good view of the sky, bleeding a hundred shades of orange and pink as the sun sank.

It was cold. So cold her nose went numb and her breath swirled in little white clouds around her mouth. Mike enfolded her hands in his and breathed on them, to warm them up.

When she was fourteen, the party camped up here, for a night. It was summer, and their air was sultry and warm. They'd stopped by the convenience store and bought a ton of candy and chips. They laid their sleeping bags across the seats of the old bus. Lucas told ghost stories, holding a flashlight under his chin, and then Dustin unveiled a bottle of liquor he claimed to have gotten from a "source that shall remain unnamed" and Mike cocked an eyebrow, impressed. Dustin made a big show of pouring drinks into the little plastic cups they'd brought. El took the cup he handed to her, sniffing it curiously.

"I'd like to propose a toast." Dustin said. "To us." He held up his cup, and they murmured their agreement. Dustin tossed his back, grimacing as it went down. Mike did the same, and Max and Lucas. El raised it to her lips and sipped. It burned, overwhelming her other senses, stinging her nose and eyes.

"Ugh." She said. "It's horrible." Everyone laughed.

The second sip wasn't as bad as the first, so she nursed it, for a while. Dustin and Lucas were on their third drink by the time she finished her first. Will hadn't touched his. Mike was nursing his second, and Max was quickly outdoing all of them. Her cheeks were flushed, and her voice got increasingly louder as she argued with Dustin over something, probably the X-Men. El reached for the liquor bottle, pouring another drink, and tossed it back. As the alcohol worked its way into her system, everything started to feel floaty and warm, and she couldn't keep herself from smiling. Mike grinned at her.

They played Truth or Dare. Lucas nearly broke his leg, jumping off the roof of the old bus where Mike and El sat, now. That was also the night Dustin swallowed an earthworm and Max drew a dick on the

door of rusted, '57 Volkswagen Beetle in permanent marker.

El poured drink number three on a dare, and everyone teased her about being a lightweight, but she didn't know what that meant and she didn't care.

Mike had to stop her from pouring a fourth, because she was starting to make things float.

"El, you're drunk." He'd taken her cup, and she just giggled, stifling a hiccup.

"I am?"

They'd settled in their sleeping bags, after a while, and she'd climbed in with Mike and snuggled against him. He kissed her, and he tasted like vodka and a promise. She drifted off, content.

El smiled, at the memory. It was one of her happiest, of that summer. She brought it up, and Mike laughed.

"I was shit-faced, that night." Mike said, grinning. "Those were the good old days."

El nodded, in agreement. She unwrapped her sandwich, acutely aware of how starving she was, even after she'd had a big lunch, and took a bite. She hummed, appreciatively. Mike pulled two cans of Dr. Pepper out of his backpack and cracked them. They polished off their sandwiches, then tossed the wrappers away. She lay back, gazing up at the sky as it grew darker and the stars appeared. Mike lay beside her.

They looked at the stars, and Mike pointed out a constellation or two. It was easy to lose yourself, up there, she thought. Too easy to gaze at those stars and float away.

"When are you going to tell your parents?" She asked, after a while. He shifted, looking at her.

"Tomorrow." His voice was barely more than a whisper.

"I'll come with you." She offered. "For emotional support."

He propped himself up on one elbow, so his face was a few inches above her. She fiddled with the drawstrings of his sweatshirt.

"My dad might say some stupid things." He warned. His brows furrowed, and little wrinkles appeared in his forehead, like they always did when he was worried or upset about something. He chewed his lip. "I don't want you to get hurt."

"I don't care what he thinks." She said. "This is my fault, I should be there."

"It's not anybody's fault." Mike said. "A stupid condom broke, that's all."

El reached up to brush a stray hair that had fallen in front of his eyes.

"I'm just saying if you want me there, I'll be there. But I understand if you don't." And she did. She imagined telling Hop with Mike there. It would've gone horribly wrong. It was probably better that she did it alone, better that the moment existed between the two of them and no one else. And if Mike needed similar space, she'd give it to him. But if he wanted her there, to fill up that terrible silence, to stand by his side when he needed her most, heaven and hell and every dimension in between wouldn't keep her from him. He just needed to say the word.

"I think I should be the one to tell them." Mike said, shrugging, which roughly translated to *I need to do this alone*.

"Okay," El said, and he must've seen the look on her face, because he frowned.

"Hey," Mike said. "It'll be alright. They'll get over it."

"Yeah." She said, though her voice didn't sound quite like her own, and let the conversation drop. She shivered, suddenly cold. She looked at him, and he leaned down and kissed her. The warmth emanating from him spread to the rest of her body, to her fingers and toes, and all the worries and fears and guilt escaped her mind as the sensation of his lips obliterated everything else.

6. Chapter 6

Mike drove to his parent's house in the late morning. It seemed silly, considering El lived a block away. But he needed this. He needed to take a breather. He'd woken as the first rays of gray light filtered through the window. He'd lain wide awake, on his back, watching sunlight brighten the room. El lay beside him, fast asleep, facing him. Her breath caused the stray, brown curls around her face to flutter. Her eyelashes fanned out against her cheeks, which were tinged pink and dusted with small freckles—sun spots, from all the summer days they'd spent outside. It was a welcome change from the bone-white, waxy skin and the dark bruises under her eyes from her days in the lab. The lilac veins crawling over her cheeks like spiders, whenever she over-exerted herself. He still couldn't quite reconcile that sick, frightened child with the girl who lay beside him, so beautiful and strong. She'd grown out of all that darkness and trauma like a flower, and he didn't know what he'd done to deserve her. This anchor, in a violent sea that threatened to drown him. This ray of light, after so many nights spent searching for a way out of the darkness. She was everything.

He'd climbed out of bed, careful not to wake her, and pulled on a sweatshirt and jeans. He scribbled a note to her, left it on the bedside table, and snuck downstairs and out the door before his brain caught up with the rest of him.

Mike passed the sign that read Maple Street and turning onto the street that lead out of the neighborhood. He wasn't ready to face his parents just yet. Wasn't ready to watch a few lines appear in his mother's face, wasn't ready to see the disappointment in his father's eyes. So he drove, without a destination in mind, heading down unfamiliar streets, making a left here, a right here, another left . . .

A song by the Eagles faded to commercial, so he switched the radio off, keen to drive in silence, the rest of the way. His thoughts were much too loud, too fast. The radio was a distraction and he was better off without it, with so many things on his mind.

He was still processing the last twenty-four hours. He'd spent the last week trying to digest the pregnancy and all it's implications. What it

meant for him, for his future, for *them* . It was such a dark cloud in his mental sky that he couldn't really face it without looking at it through a mirror. So, when the doctor turned on that monitor and revealed their baby, not just a blob of cells but a person with a heartbeat, with a nose and hands and feet, he'd felt like a ton of bricks had been dropped on him.

He still felt like a child, himself. How was he supposed to pull this off? He didn't know. He only knew he wasn't going to leave El to deal with this alone. They were a team. It felt like they always had been, like they were fated to wind up together, somehow. That chance meeting when he'd gone into the woods in the pouring rain to look for his friend hadn't been chance at all. He'd found her, or she found him, and that was both a beginning and an end, a blessing and a curse. And if it was a curse, then he thanked God for it, every day. When the world crashed down around them and monsters poured out of a literal tear in time and space, they had each other's back. It was the only thing he had to hold onto, in this life that had so suddenly turned upside down and dropped him on his ass. That had forced him into a game of trades, El's life for Will's and vice versa, so that he lived through each day in fear that it would take something from him, again, in this cycle of eternal return. They would be there, for each other, whatever happened. And that included monster invasions and armageddon, so why should a baby suddenly change things? It didn't. So he'd be there for her, and they'd do this together, and that was that.

He still couldn't wrap his brain around it. But he was at least heading in the right direction, he thought, as he drove past an old, red sign with chipping, white letters that read Sattler Quarry. He felt like he was standing at some great precipice. That everything that had happened had led him here, gazing at the water, below. This was a leap of faith, in every sense of the phrase, and he was taking that step. He'd be there for her. Through all of it.

He was going to be a father.

And a damn good one, too, he resolved, thinking of his own father. His father, whom he barely knew. Who worked long hours and spent evenings asleep in the La-Z-Boy. When he did tear his attention from the T.V. long enough to look his son in the eye, all Mike saw was a

shade of disappointment, buried deep. Even then, he wasn't really *seeing* . Mike felt so unbearably detached from his father, and the silence that filled that space between them, the chasm neither of them attempted to cross, threatened to suffocate him. He wouldn't fall to the same fate. But the voice in his head taunted him, asking *what if?* What if I end up like him? And the fear was so real and immediate it drowned out everything else.

He clutched the steering wheel, knuckles turning white.

He couldn't.

He wouldn't.

Mike headed toward his house, swallowing that knot of panic, attempting to reinforce the walls he'd built up. He tried to convince himself it didn't matter what they said, that he didn't need someone to hold his hand, anymore. This was between him and El and nobody else. If they wanted to be a part of it, fine. If they didn't, well, he didn't need them.

He'd called Nancy in New York, just as soon as El told him about the pregnancy, spewing his guts out, over the phone. He didn't know why she, of all people, was the first person he'd told. Maybe because she, of all people, knew what it was like growing up with parents who barely spoke. Maybe it was because he trusted her, admired her, even, though he'd never admit it. He'd broken down and cried, then. Nancy had sounded close to tears, herself, but she'd comforted him as best she could, from so many miles away, telling him everything would be okay.

"You have to tell Mom and Dad." She'd said. "They're gonna freak, but it's better to get it over with." He'd agreed with her and hung up.

Mike parked in front of his house, at the end of the cul-de-sac. He made made way up the walk, opened the front door, and stepped into the entryway.

He'd told his parents he was coming home today, choosing to leave the part about coming early for El's appointment out of the conversation, which gave him some time. Time to be with El, away

from everything else. Time to go to her doctor's appointment and to support her and be there for her in all the ways he knew how. Time to gather his bearings.

"Mom?" He called.

"Mike?"

He heard footsteps, upstairs. His mother appeared on the landing. She smiled, rushing down the steps to throw her arms around him.

"Hey, honey. How're you? How was the drive?" She asked.

"Fine."

"Good." She pulled away, beaming. He couldn't find it in him to return her smile. "Did you eat breakfast? I've probably got some pancake batter left over."

"No, I'm not hungry." He said. It was the truth. He'd never been so aggressively unhungry in his life.

"Where's Holly?"

"She slept over at a friend's house. She'll be home soon." His mother told him, quickly, intent on her quest to get every little bit of information out of him. "How are your classes?"

"Good. Everything's good. Hey, is Dad home?" He asked, distractedly, shifting his weight.

His mother's brow furrowed, slightly.

"Uh, yeah. Ted!" She called. His father wandered out of the kitchen, newspaper in hand.

"Mike!" His father exclaimed, clapping him on the back.

"Hey, Dad." He said. He glanced at them both, then fixed his gaze on the floor.

"Can I talk to you guys, for a second?"

"About what? What's wrong?" His mother asked, frowning.

Mike swallowed, licking his lips. He took a breath, inspecting his shoes.

"El's pregnant."

He told them, watching their faces turn from confusion to fear to disappointment and back, in the spaces between seconds. His mother's hands went to her mouth.

"Oh, *Mike* ." She whispered, beginning to cry, which was the worst part. He hated watching her cry. It was enough to push him close to tears, which is what he wanted to avoid, of all things. Because crying somehow made him feel weak, and right now, he needed to be strong. For El. For the baby.

He was always a sensitive kid.

"Wheeler's a crybaby!" The mouthbreathers and bullies would yell, jeering.

He never really grew out of it, either. He didn't cry as much, but he felt things too deeply. Loved too much. He didn't know if that was a bad thing, and maybe it wasn't. Maybe it was strength. But right now, it didn't feel like it. And he couldn't keep the tears from coming. They got all stuck in his throat, hot and itchy, and he was so damn *angry* , because he promised himself he'd keep it all together and now he was falling apart.

"Oh, Mike. Honey . . . " His mom said, again. "Mike . . ." She shook her head, opening her arms, and he walked straight into them. She held him, stroking his hair, while he broke down.

"It's okay." She said. "It'll be okay." Over and over again, voice edged with a note of hysteria, and he clung to her, trying to pull himself together. Finally, he drew away, wiping his eyes. He looked at his father.

Ted Wheeler folded his arms, frowning.

"Michael, this is irresponsible." He said. "You should've been more

careful."

"I know." He said. "But it is what it is."

"I knew that girl was trouble." He said. "I knew it!" Mike froze, feeling the color drain from his face. Rage boiled his blood, and red blossomed along the edges of his vision.

"Ted!" Karen exclaimed, reproachful.

"Don't talk about her like that!" Mike yelled. He glared at his father.

"She's strange." Ted said. "Spending all that time with a bunch of boys . . . look what happened!"

Mike reeled.

"She's not like that!" He couldn't believe what he was hearing. They *knew* El. She'd spent Christmas with them, she'd accompanied them on vacations. She babysat Holly. He'd taken her to school dances and parties. When they were in high school, she spent almost every afternoon at his house.

"She is the best thing that ever happened to me!" He yelled.

"You sure know how to pick 'em, son."

"Go to hell!" Mike clenched his fists. "Don't you dare talk about her like that in front of me! I love her! And I'm going to marry her!" He shouted, hoarsely. "And we're having a baby."

"You're too young . . ." His mother said, with a kind of pleading desperation in her voice, and Mike glared at her.

"I'm an adult. I'm old enough to make my own decisions. If you don't like it, fine, but this is my choice."

"You're being unreasonable, Michael. A baby changes things. You can't possibly know how much of a burden this will be." His father said, shaking his head. "I won't support it."

"This isn't ideal. You don't think I know that? I do. But it doesn't

matter. I'm not going to leave her alone. And if you don't support it, fine, but don't take it out on El. And don't ever, *ever* insult her in front of me!"

"Michael . . ." Ted began.

"I'm doing this. With or without you." Mike said, cutting him off. Tears were streaming down his face, but his rage fueled his words, and they cut through the air, cold and sharp as ice. "I'm sure your grandchild would appreciate having grandparents around, to look up to and spend time with. But I guess that's wishful thinking. God knows you couldn't give that to your own son." He'd crossed a line, but he didn't care. He'd reached the point of no return, and hysteria threatened to pull his head under water.

His mother burst into tears, at his words. Ted Wheeler stood, rooted to the spot.

"Get out." He said, quietly. Dangerously. "Get out of my house."

"Fine."

Mike turned, spinning on his heel. He wrenched open the door, storming onto the porch and down the front steps.

"Mike!" His mother called, but he didn't stop. He kept walking, resisting the urge to break into a run, tears slipping down his cheeks, stinging in the cold. "Mike, wait!" His mother's fingers closed around his wrist. He yanked his arm away, and she lost her grip. He turned, looking at her. Tears glittered in her eyes.

"He didn't mean it. Mike, don't go . . . We'll figure this out . . ." She begged.

He shook his head, choking back a sob.

"I'm sorry."

He got in his car, fired up the engine, and pulled away from the curb. He got halfway down the street before the tears blurred his vision. He turned the corner and whipped out of sight.

He drove for a while, unsure where he wanted to go. He made a series of random turns, running a red light in the process, unable to rid his brain of the image of his mother, standing on the street corner, looking so broken and fragile and old. He left her there. He'd never forgive himself. But he couldn't go back. He was no longer welcome. That, at least, was loud and clear.

The world had begun to spin in slow circles, and his heart beat much too fast, in his temples. He needed to pull over.

He parked, shutting off the engine. He sat back, pressing his palms over his eyes, very aware that he was, in fact, freaking out. He was falling over the edge and falling fast, and the water was rushing up to meet him. All he could do was shut his eyes and brace for impact.

None came. His pulse slowed, and the dizziness ebbed. He blew out a breath, gazing at the street. A gaggle of passerby walked by, laughing and talking. The town seemed alien to him. This place, which was once his home, seemed so small, so strange. He'd outgrown it.

This town had given him nothing. Nothing but a bitter taste on his tongue and nightmares that plagued his sleep. But that wasn't true, and he knew it.

It had given him a couple of friends. Their faces run through his mind. Dustin and Lucas and Will and Max. The strongest and bravest and kindest people he'd ever met. And El. The love of his life, the mother of his child. El, who was strange and mysterious. Who could throw you across the room like you were nothing. Who'd kill for you, literally. Who was so impossibly strong and brave and kind, the kindest of all of them, even after the world chewed her up and spit her out. Even after they took everything from her. Even after they tried to make her a monster.

Somehow, Mike wound up in a convenience store, off Fourth Street. He went to the cash register, bought a pack of Camels and a lighter, and walked a short distance to the park, down the street. He sat on a park bench, pulled a cigarette out of the pack, and lit it. He dragged, eyes watering as he fought the urge to cough. The stuff set his insides on fire, but he didn't care. Anything to push away these dark, stormcloud thoughts. The drug worked its way into his system, and

he leaned back, cheeks and nose reddening in the cold. He pulled his hands inside his sleeves, hugging them close to his body. This autumn had been one of the coldest, and there were heavy clouds gathering on the horizon. He wouldn't be surprised if it snowed.

He took a few more drags on the cigarette, then dropped it on the ground, crushing it. His hands shook, and his knee bounced, like it always did when he was nervous.

He didn't know how to tell El that his parents had kicked him out. He didn't want her to think it had anything to do with her or the baby, because it didn't. It had to do with all the things he'd said.

He didn't want to see the look on El's face, the disappointment and guilt, when he told her how terribly that conversation had gone. And he didn't really want to think about things going forward, without his parents in the picture. He'd have to work this out, sometime or other. He couldn't go on not talking to them. And he really did want his parents to be part of their child's life.

Mike's grandma died when he was ten. He'd been close with her. They used to take walks in the park, and they had this thing where they'd feed the ducks in the pond. Those were some of his happiest memories. Who was he to deny that right to his child?

You can't possibly know how much of a burden this will be . . .

Without his parents, how were they going to afford the cost of living, with a baby on the way? How would he have time to work and do well in his classes and take care of a tiny human who was completely and utterly dependent on him? El was working, too, of course, but she'd have to take some time off when she actually had the kid. There were grocery bills and medical expenses and insurance and all that adult stuff. He'd imagined them living together, once the baby was born. So that added rent to the ever-growing list of Things He Couldn't Afford. And then there was the wedding, which didn't need to be extravagant, of course, but he'd always imagined some kind of gathering, some celebration. His brain hurt, trying to digest all the logistics, so he tried to stop his mind from derailing, completely.

Eventually, he returned to his car, shoving those thoughts into the

corners of his mind. He returned to El's place, drumming his knuckles on the door before walking in. He found Hop sitting at the kitchen table, nursing a mug of coffee, cigarette dangling from his lips.

He looked up, startled, as Mike appeared in the entryway, and Mike immediately felt bad. He'd obviously intruded on some kind of private moment. The man had a faraway look in his eyes, as if he'd spent the last several minutes deep in thought. The Chief gave his head a small shake, clearing his throat.

"Where's El?" Mike asked, as casually as possible. He squirmed, inwardly. He and the Chief hadn't exactly gotten off on the right foot. Things had always been tense but now they were almost unbearable, and Mike's eyes darted around the room, searching for the nearest exit.

"She went to the store." Hopper said. "We're out of milk." He returned his gaze to the window.

"How'd it go?" Hopper asked, without looking at him.

"Not good." Mike admitted.

Hopper sighed.

"Sorry, kid." He said. "Life can be a real bitch, sometimes. Just when you think you're getting the hang of it, it turns around and bites you in the ass."

"Yeah."

"The best you can do is roll with the punches." Hopper said. "I try to do the best I can, for her. Sometimes I screw up. I screw up more than I'd like to admit. But you can't sit around and cry about it. You gotta admit your mistakes and move on." Hopper exhaled, blowing smoke rings. Mike dropped into a chair, across from him. Silence fell over them.

"I'm not mad, kid." He said, surveying him, over the top of his tented hands. "You're a good kid. These things happen. If you ask me, I think El's lucky to have someone so willing to support her. It'll be difficult as hell but not impossible. You'll be okay."

Mike cocked an eyebrow, taken by surprise. A second ago, he would've bet his life Hopper didn't have one good thing to say about him.

"When she told me, I got angry. And I knew I messed up, big time. The look on her face . . ." Hop shook his head, trailing off. "It kills me, to see her like that. She was so upset. And I just got so *mad* . . ." He took a sip of his coffee, eyes downcast. "This isn't anybody's fault. Not hers, not yours. And it doesn't do anybody any good to get angry. The best I can do is try to support her, in whatever way possible. This is something we're gonna have to deal with. And if I learned anything from my child-rearing days, first with Sara, then El, I learned it really does take a village. I wish your parents could see that."

Mike nodded. They lapsed into silence, for a while, though it wasn't uncomfortable. Mike searched for words, some way to express how grateful he was that at least one adult in his life actually gave two shits. Grateful that Hopper would be around to help them and support them. And though he dared not admit it aloud, despite everything, despite the tension and the differing opinions between them, Mike admired the Chief.

"Thank you." He said, after a long while. He didn't elaborate. He didn't need to. Hopper raised his mug.

"To fatherhood." He said, mouth twitching into a smile. Mike laughed.

"To fatherhood."

Mike and El were sitting at the kitchen table in their pajamas on Sunday morning, eating a breakfast of the scrambled eggs and French toast they'd made, when the doorbell rang. El made to get up, but he leapt to his feet before she could do more than rise halfway out of her chair. Mike walked into the entryway, answering the door. His mother stood on the porch, nervous and teary, carrying a big cardboard box in her arms. She looked at him, and her face seemed to wither, at the corners.

"Um." She said, breathily. "May I come in?"

Mike nodded. He stepped aside, and his mother paused, closing her eyes, and he could see her physically pulling herself together. She opened them, then marched straight past him, hugging that cardboard box to her chest. He followed her, closing the door. His mother started talking very fast, barely pausing for breath.

"I dug around in the attic for some of our old baby stuff. I found some old clothes and toys I thought you might like to look through. Most of it's junk but some of it's salvageable, I just brought it over so you could look through it and pick what you want. I was gonna donate it all to goodwill, anyway, and—" She paused, abruptly, as El appeared in the doorway. Mike caught her eye.

Mike told her about the fight he'd had with his parents as soon as she'd returned home, brushing over some details and leaving others out, completely, but he knew he couldn't really keep anything from her. She could read him like a book. She'd looked at him with eyes so full of reproach and guilt and pain he thought for sure his chest would splinter into a million shards of glass. She'd offered to talk to them, herself, but he'd advised against it. It would probably just make things worse, and it wasn't fair for him to let her clean up his mess. She'd fallen silent, then. And she kept shooting him guilty, pitying looks, as if she expected him fall apart at any moment.

Mike's mother eyed El, and the two women sized each other up, testing emotional waters. His mother took a step toward her, then thought better of it, shifting her weight. She wrung her hands, nervously, eyes darting to the floor.

"Mike told me, um, about the baby . . ." His mom stuttered. She took a deep breath. "And I know it's a hard time . . . for all of us, and I know Ted and I didn't react . . . react well but I want you to know I . . ." She trailed off, looking helpless. "I'm gonna be there, for you. In whatever way possible. And I brought this old baby stuff. Um . . ."

El smiled, hesitantly. "Thank you."

His mom smiled, pleased. She carried the box to the living room and setting it on the coffee table. It was old and stained and worn. El opened the box, peering inside. She fished around for a moment, pulling out a green onesie with a frog embroidered on the chest. She

smiled, holding it up for Mike's inspection.

"Cute, huh?"

He nodded, mind reeling. He couldn't quite get over it. That this was real and this was happening. But every passing day solidified the idea in his mind. Maybe one day he'd wake up and think *I'm gonna be a father* and not break down in a mini panic attack at the thought. But today was not that day. El folded the onesie and set it aside, returning her attention to the box. Mrs. Wheeler settled herself in a chair.

"I know it's still early, but I thought you might like to look through this stuff before I donate it." She said, shrugging. She looked at El.

"How many weeks along?"

"Ten." She said. "The doctor did an ultrasound. Hold on, I have a picture . . ." El left, rushing up the stairs. When she came back, she carried the envelope with the ultrasound photos in her hand.

"Here." She handed a copy to Mike's mom. She took it, holding it with trembling fingers.

"Oh my god." She breathed, and tears welled in her eyes. She looked at Mike. "Isn't it precious?"

Mike nodded.

She sighed, dabbing at her eyes with the corner of her sleeve, sniffing. She handed the photo to El, who tucked it away in the envelope and set it aside.

El returned her attention to the box. It contained mostly clothes, and El set aside a soft, cotton shirt, another onesie, and a little pair of sneakers. Apart from the clothes, there was a little stuffed bear and a rattle shaped like an elephant, made of soft material.

"That was Mike's favorite toy, when he was a baby." Mrs. Wheeler interjected. She laughed. "When I tried to take it away you'd throw a fit."

El grinned, setting it in the 'Keep' Pile. She lifted a soft, blue blanket out of the box and held it to her cheek.

"Soft." El remarked, handing it to Mike. He took it, running his fingers over the fabric.

El looked at Mrs. Wheeler.

"Thank you." She said, and crossed the room to hug her. Mike's mom froze, startled, before hugging her back.

"Oh, you're welcome, sweetheart. I know this isn't ideal, but maybe we can make the most of it. And if you need anything, just tell me, okay?" She patted El's soldier. "After three kids, I've seen it all."

El nodded, smiling. Mrs. Wheeler went to Mike, brushing a hair off his forehead. Her eyes welled with fresh tears. She embraced him, and he wrapped his arms around her.

"I'm sorry." She whispered, into his shoulder. "For what we said, before. Your father, he says things without thinking. He didn't mean it. He was just upset, Mike, you have to understand that. This is . . . quite a shock."

Mike nodded, swallowing. He dashed something treacherously wet from his cheek.

"I know." He said, and the tightness in his chest lightened, somewhat. "I'm sorry, too."

Mike left in the afternoon. El followed him to his car, and he cupped her cheek and kissed her, deeply, only resurfacing when he had to come up for air.

"I'll see you soon." He told her. He bent down, so he was level with her stomach.

"Hang in there, little guy. Take care of your momma." El laughed, brushing a hand through his curls.

"It can't hear you."

"Says who?"

"Says logic. It's ears probably aren't even developed."

"I'm optimistic." He said, grinning. He straightened, cupping her face in his hands. "I love you."

"I love you, too." She said, tilting her chin up for another kiss. He got in the car, and she waved as he pulled out of the driveway.

He arrived in Indianapolis in the evening. He returned to his dorm, tossing his overnight bag on the bed. He unzipped the front pocket and pulled out a thin, yellow envelope. He pulled a copy of the ultrasound out of it, then rooted around in his desk for a thumbtack. He came up empty handed and settled for a piece of Scotch tape. He taped the photo securely on the wall, above of his bed, and stepped back to admire his handiwork.

7. Chapter 7

El stood on a chair the kitchen, rummaging around in the cabinets for some garlic salt. At only five-feet-three she was ridiculously unfit to reach the top shelf, and she cursed her height as she shoved various appliances and canned goods out of the way. Everyone was home for Thanksgiving break, and Joyce was hosting a party at the Byers' household. It was the perfect opportunity to tell the Party about the baby. She didn't know when they'd all be together again; most of them were spending Thanksgiving with their families, and they had to head back to school in the following days. El pushed down the butterflies fluttering in her stomach, and though the nerves weren't nearly as bad as they were when she had to tell Hop, she wasn't quite sure how they'd react.

El located the garlic salt in the back of a cupboard and stepped down from her chair, massaging her stomach, absently. She pressed the pad of her index and middle finger over the skin below her belly button, feeling a bit of resistance. She wasn't showing. She'd spent a fair amount of time in front the mirror, smoothing her t-shirt so it lay flat against her stomach, trying to decide if you could tell. This was ridiculous, of course. It was way too early. Nevertheless, she could feel the difference. Lately, her lower abdomen felt hard and tight and sore. Especially when she laughed. Add that to the list of pregnancy symptoms she was discovering, a little at a time.

It had been two weeks since she visited Dr. Simmons. She received a call shortly after the appointment. Simmons notified her that all her tests looked good and they'd expect her back in the second week of December, giving El the green light to breathe a sigh of relief. Everything was progressing normally, and, if everything continued to go according to plan, she could expect to welcome her bundle of joy to the world in early May.

El set the garlic salt on the kitchen counter and began searching for a bowl. Joyce asked her to bring chips and dip, so she'd decided to make some guacamole. The party started at five, which gave her a little under an hour to get ready. She still needed to shower and change, and Mike told her he'd meet her a little early, so they could

head over together. Hopper was driving over from the station, so she didn't count on seeing him beforehand.

El sliced the avocados and mashed them up, sprinkling garlic salt and lemon juice into the bowl, and added a spoonful of salsa. After she'd finished, she dashed up the stairs, taking them two at a time. She forwent a shower and massaged some dry shampoo into her scalp, tying her hair up into a half-decent bun. She changed out of her gym shorts and t-shirt, pulling on a soft, forest green sweater and jeans. By the time she'd finished with her makeup, she had an extra ten minutes to spare.

Ten minutes became five, and five became two, and Mike hadn't shown up. She paced in the entryway, contemplating leaving, without him, when the door opened and he stumbled over the threshold, panting.

"I'm here." He breathed.

"You're late." She said, frowning. She folded her arms.

"I know. Sorry, I got stuck in traffic." He crossed the room, seized her elbows, and pecked her cheek. "Forgive me?"

"Maybe."

He kissed her lips, soft and sweet.

"How 'bout now?"

She rolled her eyes. Nevertheless, he'd managed to tease a smile out of her.

"You're a dork, you know that?"

"Of course." He said, as if she'd just pointed out that the Earth was round.

"C'mon, we're gonna be even more late than we already are."

As soon as she walked through the Byers' front door, Dustin swept her into a bone-crushing hug.

"Hey, Jean Grey." He said. "I missed you so goddamn much!"

"I missed you too, Dustin." She said, laughing. Lucas shoved him out of the way and hugged her, too. After she'd hugged Will and Max, in turn, Steve scooped her in his arms, lifting her off her feet. She squirmed, laughing. He set her down, and she shoved him in the chest, playfully.

"I see you every day, loser."

"Since when does that mean I can't get a hug from my favorite weirdo?" He hugged her. She laughed.

"I thought Will was your favorite."

"I don't pick favorites." Steve said, quickly. "But if I had to it would most definitely absolutely no questions asked be Will, because he's the least annoying out of all of you little dipshits."

El rolled her eyes.

They made their way out of the entryway and into the living room, talking over one another. Dustin disappear into the kitchen and returned with an armful of snacks. El perched herself on the arm of the sofa, reaching for a bowl of pretzels. Max sat next to her, punching her arm, good naturedly. El smiled.

"How's school?" She asked Max.

"It's good. I mean, my classes are interesting and my professors are nice." She said, smiling. "It's good to be home. I missed the ocean." She'd grown up in Southern California, and decided to return to the west coast.

"My roommate's a dork, though." She smirked. She and Lucas were living in Los Angeles. Max was majoring in kinesiology, while Lucas was studying astronomy.

"How's Hawkins?"

"Same." El said. "Boring."

Max sighed, sympathetically.

El bit her lip. She couldn't pretend like she didn't wish she was moving away and going to college and chasing dreams, like they were. Sure, she had a good job with decent wages and a lot of time to do whatever she wanted, but she wasn't chasing anything. And all those empty hours would be filled up, once the baby was born. She couldn't pretend like she didn't envy the look in Will's eyes when he talked about his art classes at Pratt, or when Mike, in pursuit of a degree in Journalism, went on and on about the books he was reading or the writing assignments he was working on. But that just wasn't the path she was destined to take.

She and Hopper had talked it over, in those days when the boys were up to their ears in college applications and essays, and she'd told him she didn't think she was quite ready for college. She had no idea what she wanted to do, for starts. Why waste the money on classes?

Still, she felt a pang of resentment, maybe even regret, as she listened to them recount tales of late-night, dorm room shenanigans and parties and opportunities to study abroad.

It took them no time at all to fall back into that easy banter, full of jokes and good-natured teasing and more than a few Star Wars references. When Lucas and Will started betting on the number of cheese puffs Dustin could fit in his mouth, El swelled with happiness and relief. Nothing had changed. Not really. She was afraid things wouldn't ever go back to the way they were, before, but now she knew she'd been wrong to worry.

"Will, how's art school?" Lucas asked.

"Good. Great, actually. My professors are really talented. We get to experiment with all kinds of media, too. I'm taking this sculpting class, and it's probably the most interesting class I've ever taken. I'm doing 2-D stuff, too, hold on . . ." He got up, went to his room, and came back with a portfolio full of sketches. He handed it to Lucas, and everyone crowded around as he leafed through the various sketches and paintings.

They were beautiful. El's eyes traced over the lines Will had so

painstakingly traced, the dashes of white pencil or ink, to bring each piece to life.

There were sketches of people, talking or standing or sitting, clothed or in the nude. Most of the subjects were strangers, to El. But some of them she recognized. There was a sketch of Joyce, cigarette in hand, smiling a rare smile. One of Jonathan, one of Mike. Some of the sketches weren't people at all. Some of the were still lifes of fruit or a tea kettle or a pair of shoes. And then there were the monsters. A whole collection of paintings and drawings that featured the stuff of nightmares. He used dark colors for these, all blacks and blues and reds. The Demogorgon, sketched with charcoal and a heavy hand, sat poised and ready to spring off the page, and chills ran up El's spine. She grabbed the paper, inspecting it, feeling the color drain from her cheeks.

"Shit." Steve muttered.

"This is unreal." She breathed. When she finally tore her eyes away from the drawing, she met Will's gaze. He looked at her, almost guiltily.

"I know it's all just bad memories, but it helps. I can't go around keeping at all inside my head. If I did that, I'd explode." He paused.

"You should've seen my professor's face, when she saw that one." Will went on, taking the sketch of the Demogorgon from El's hand, looking at it. "She kept going on and on about how imaginative I was, how she didn't think many students could come up with something like this. The thing is, I didn't just make it up. All of it's too fucking real."

"Amen." Lucas said.

After they'd stuffed themselves full of snacks, Joyce announced dinner, and they all filed into the kitchen, attempting to shove more food in their mouths. After dinner, the party went into Will's room. He put a Smiths vinyl on the turntable. El lay on the floor, in a food coma. Dustin, Lucas, and Max sat cross-legged on his bed, playing cards. Soon, though, the room got stuffy and hot, with all of them cramped into such a small space. El, who'd grown sick of listening to

Dustin's complaints about losing at Rummy for the fifth time in a row, suggested they head out to Castle Byers.

They donned their coats and hats and went into the woods surrounding the Byers' house, feet crunching over frost-coated leaves. Mike slipped his hand in her own, and she squeezed it. They all filed through the door. El looked around. It seemed small.

Maybe they'd outgrown it.

They settled themselves inside, sitting or standing in a circle. A solemn silence hung over them. El thought about all the times they'd slept out here, in their sleeping bags, during warm summer nights. That time a rainstorm flooded the area and destroyed one side, and they spent the weekend making repairs. All the times each of them had sought comfort and solace within these makeshift walls.

"I'm hungry." Dustin said, breaking the silence.

"You're always hungry."

"Let's make S'mores."

"That's . . . not a bad idea." Mike said.

Lucas and Max retrieved an armful of firewood from the shed, and El and Will rummaged around in the Byers' kitchen for marshmallows and graham crackers. Mike grabbed some foldable lawn chairs from the backyard. They sat around the fire, trading banter. El watched her marshmallow turn golden brown, throwing glances at her friends. She'd have to tell them, at some point. What better time than now, when it was just the six of them?

So, she told them, keeping her eyes fixed on Mike as the words came tumbling out of her mouth. When it was said and done and out in the open, she tore her eyes away and inspected the scuffed toes of her black Chuck Taylors, instead.

Their reactions ranged from shock to a few, flat attempts at humor. Dustin shouted, "*you horny little shits!*" and Will stared at them with a mixture of disbelief and reproach.

"Holy fuck." Max said, and then punched Mike's shoulder. "Did you guys pay *any* attention in sex ed?"

"Yes." Mike retorted. "We're not *that* stupid." He looked at his shoes. "Sometimes condoms break. It's not a big deal." He mumbled.

"Uh, it's a really big deal!" Lucas cried, folding his arms.

"What're you gonna do?" Will asked, brows knit. He looked at El. She rubbed a hand over her stomach.

"We're keeping it."

In the end, they were supportive. They had each other's back, no matter what. When monsters came knocking, and they were staring down the barrel of the gun, they'd take a bullet for each other. This, she was certain of.

Lucas clapped Mike on the back, offering a smile.

"We're here for you guys, whatever you need."

Mike glanced at him.

"Thanks, Lucas."

"Mrs. Wheeler invited us over for Thanksgiving dinner." El told Hopper, matter-of-factly, during the drive home from the station. She sat in the passenger seat, hands knotted and resting on her stomach. She kept touching her belly, Hopper noticed. When she was sitting at her desk or lost in thought. When they watched *Family Feud* or *Days of Our Lives* reruns. And every time she did, it stirred up a storm of thoughts and fears and worries he'd rather keep shoved deep in some dark corner of his mind.

If anything, the pregnancy had bridged some of the gaps still left in the haphazard little family they'd built for themselves. It stirred up those murky waters that held truths he, himself, wasn't willing to examine, let alone admit out loud. It strengthened his resolve to support her and protect her, though he knew she was far from some fragile thing that needed babysitting. Sure, he still kept a revolver in

the top drawer of his bedside table, in the event that those government bastards might march through the door and try to take his kid away. *Over his dead body*, he thought, and laughed a twisted sort of laugh. Sure, he still paced the floor whenever she stayed out later than the curfew they'd agreed upon, wrestling with a thousand different scenarios as they ran through his head, each one more horrible than the last. She always came home, though, and he always yelled, but they always worked it out.

Sure, they still fought. Sure, there were barriers and boundaries that both of them broke, on occasion. But the ground rule was the same: don't be stupid. And he tried. God, he tried. He recognized that she was her own person with her own life. That she needed to explore what it meant to be a socially adept, functioning member of society. That she had friends and commitments that demanded her attention. That she'd spent her whole life locked in prisons and manipulated into obedience (both of which he wasn't totally innocent) and that she needed space to breathe and a chance to make her own decisions. So he let her go. He let her make those decisions, and if she screwed up, he did his best to catch her when she fell. To hold her while she cried. To bandage those skinned knees. The pregnancy didn't change things. Maybe it meant there were more stumbles, more tears, more scrapes and bruises. But that didn't change a thing. He'd be there, for all of it.

When she suggested they attend Thanksgiving dinner at the Wheeler's, his first instinct was to refuse. Sitting at a table with Mike's parents, attempting small talk, trying to avoid the elephant in the room, was *not* something that capped the list of Things He Wanted To Spend His Holiday Doing. It didn't even make the top five. Bits and pieces of what Ted Wheeler had said about El and the pregnancy had reached him, and it took everything in his power not to march over there and punch the man in the face for every stupid thing he'd ever uttered, but he refrained. For her sake, he refrained.

It was important to her. He could tell she'd gotten her hopes up. That maybe a family gathering was just the thing they needed to patch things up and somehow all get along with rainbows and butterflies to boot. He didn't have the heart to tell her he couldn't see that happening in the near future. He couldn't look her in the eyes, so full

of guilt and shame, already (even though she had *nothing* to be guilty or ashamed of, he reminded her) and tell her that Ted would probably never be okay with her decision to raise the baby. That he saw this as a burden and an embarrassment. That sometimes people just weren't willing to set aside their differences, and Ted fell somewhere in that category. She believed she could fix this, and he couldn't shatter her hopes. So, he agreed to dinner, for her sake. But not without some grumbling, and she just punched him in the shoulder, wrestling with a grin.

He would go to dinner, but he wasn't making any other promises. In truth, he didn't know if he had it in him to make it through an entire meal without introducing his fist to Ted Wheeler's nose.

On Thanksgiving, he spent the morning helping her make a sweet potato casserole, rushing to the store to buy pecans and brown sugar. It didn't turn out the way she'd hoped. She was frustrated and on the verge of tears, and Hop knew it had nothing to do with the damn casserole. He tried to reassure her, but she wasn't having it. She started loading the dishwasher, refusing to look at him.

"Leave it, El. I'll do it."

She ignored him. He caught her wrist, and she attempted to wrench it out of his grasp.

"El." He said. "Please." She looked at him, then, opening her mouth to argue with him. He watched the fight drain out of her, the exhaustion—both mental and physical—pulling at the corners of her face. She accepted defeat.

After he'd finished in the kitchen, he found her in the living room, curled up on the sofa, fast asleep. He draped a blanket over her and pressed a kiss to her forehead, wondering how they were gonna make it through these next couple months.

El knocked on the door. Once. Twice. Three times. She glanced at Hopper, shifting her weight, arms laden with the casserole she'd made. He held a bottle of wine. He caught her eye and nodded. She licked her lips, stomach sinking through the floor as muffled footsteps

approached and the door swung open. Nancy stood in the doorway. A broad grin stretched over her face. She swept El into a hug.

"Hey, El." She said, drawing back. "I heard the news." Her eyes searched El's face. "Mike told me."

She touched El's arm.

"I know you're probably really scared, but you're gonna be fine. You're the strongest person I know."

El's mouth twitched. She inspected her shoes, touched.

"Thank you."

Nancy looked at Hopper.

"Hey, Chief."

"Hey, yourself."

"C'mon in." Nancy said, beckoning, and El entered. It felt weird to be invited into a house that had been a second home to her, all these years. The Wheeler household was the designated hangout. And there had been a time when she and Mike's lives were so closely intertwined, they just walked into each other's houses without knocking. El spent plenty of rainy afternoons with Mike in the basement, doing homework or playing on the Atari. And she remembered the countless hours they wasted on the living room couch, poring over a notebook full of sketches for a new D&D campaign. They'd work on it until they grew bored and watched T.V. She missed those days. So careless and infinite. Or so she thought.

In the entryway, Holly greeted her.

"Ellie!" She yelled, excitedly, and wrapped her arms around El's middle. El hugged her back, ruffling her blond hair.

"Hey, Holls!"

Holly beamed.

El followed Nancy into the kitchen, where Mrs. Wheeler was busy preparing Thanksgiving dinner. She broke into a smile as El walked in, and rushed to take the dish in her arms.

"Thank you, sweetie." She said, in a falsetto voice. El smiled.

"No worries."

"Mike's upstairs." She said. "He needs to set the table. Tell him, will you?"

"I can set the table." El offered. Mrs. Wheeler beamed.

"I put the silverware on the dining table. There are plates in the china cabinet. We've got seven." El nodded, going into the dining room. Carefully, she removed the silverware and plates from their cloth wrappings. Once, a plate slipped out of her fingers and shattered on the floor. Or would've shattered, had she not stopped the course of its fall with a flick of her consciousness, extending an invisible hand to catch it. She set it back on the table, blowing out a breath.

After she'd finished, she climbed the stairs, searching for Mike. She'd no sooner reached the landing when the lock on the door to her left clicked and Ted Wheeler emerged, flicking the light switch. She froze, when she saw him, brain kicking into overdrive as she tried to decide what to say to him. She settled for a polite hello, barely audible, and fixed her eyes on the ground. Ted uttered a short *harrumph* and pushed past her, starting down the stairs. El paused, wrestling with the leaden feeling in her gut. She leaned against the bannister and took a moment to gather her bearings, blinking back the tears that had begun to burn behind her eyes, threatening to make an appearance.

She found Mike in his room, lying on his bed. Music blasted out of the stereo on his dresser.

"Is my timing that flawed, our respect run so dry?"

She paused in the doorway, rapping her knuckles on the doorframe. He turned, jumping to his feet.

"Hey." He said, smiling, and opened his arms. She walked straight

into them, wrapping her arms around his middle, holding fast. She inhaled his scent—a mixture of laundry detergent and rain. On the stereo, Ian Curtis sang *"Love, love will tear us apart, again."*

Mike ran a hand through her curls, leaning his cheek against her temple.

"What's wrong?" He whispered, against her hair. She drew away.

"Nothing." El said, with her best attempt at a smile. Mike searched her face.

"You sure?"

"Positive."

"How's Junior?" He asked, touching her stomach.

"Fine." She said.

"Cravings?"

"Oranges. Orange slices, orange juice, anything orange."

"Gas?"

"Lots. I'm bloated, like, all the time." She puffed her cheeks out, and Mike laughed. She lifted her shirt, guiding his hand to her lower abdomen, pressing his palm to her skin. She sighed, leaning her head on his shoulder, completely and utterly content. He pressed chaste kisses to her forehead. His lips moved to her mouth, and the kisses got needier, but Mrs. Wheeler interrupted them when she called from downstairs, voice piercing the air.

"Mike!"

"What?" He yelled, back.

"I need your help!"

"Coming!"

He drew away, pecking her on the cheek.

"To be continued?" He asked, sheepish. She laughed, punching his shoulder. She followed him downstairs, passing the living room, where Hop, beer in one hand, cigarette in the other, was teaching Holly how to play poker for M&Ms.

Mrs. Wheeler needed a few things from the grocery store and Mike, grateful for a chance to get out the house and out from under his parents' gaze, obliged. His mother's eyes, big and brown, which kept darting to him, only to flit away again, testing his emotional waters. And she'd let small, sad, adult sighs escape her periodically, whenever she looked at him, and he could feel the pity and the shame and the guilt burning holes into him. It had been like that since he'd dropped the bomb on them, and though he'd made haphazard amends with his mother, he still felt her disappointment as if it was a tangible thing. And his father wouldn't speak to him or look him in the eye. Mike felt himself slowly losing grasp on anything resembling sanity, trying to ignore the warring halves tearing into him like a scavenging animal. So, when the opportunity to escape the house for a few, blissful minutes presented itself, he seized it.

El accompanied him. He drove, and she sat in the passenger seat, mentally scanning the radio for a good channel. A heavy fog hung over the streets, coating the rooftops and the asphalt with a layer of ethereal white. It hadn't yet snowed, though it certainly seemed cold enough. They had a bit of rain, earlier this week, but mostly the days were drenched in a layer of moisture that walked the line between mist and frost. And it was bitterly cold. The windows of his car fogged up, as well, and the streetlights cast a circular, orange haze that reflected off the wet asphalt.

Bradley's Big Buy, thankfully, was open during the holidays. El and Mike walked hand-in-hand across the parking lot, entering through the automatic glass doors—repaired, of course, since El shattered them with her mind. El couldn't help thinking about the incident, now, after all these years. She was nearly unrecognizable, with a head full of curls that fell well past her shoulders, bright eyes and pink cheeks. Nothing like the scrawny little girl who stole Eggos and ate them cold and soggy in the woods.

Mike grabbed a can of cranberry sauce and a bag of french rolls, a carton of milk and some ingredients to make a salad and threw them

into the basket he carried. El walked beside him, reading from the sticky note on which Mrs. Wheeler had scribbled a makeshift grocery list. As they walked past the bakery section with all the fresh bread and pastries, El spotted a delicious-looking pumpkin pie, which she convinced him to buy for dessert. She liked to keep a running list of all the thing she loved most, after a lifetime of such depravity that the only thing she had to appreciate was a threadbare blanket they'd given her, to keep warm in such a place that always seemed so deathly cold, and a stuffed tiger for company. So, she kept a list of all the little things she never had but cherished so dearly, now. Pumpkin pie was very high on that list, holding a place alongside warm, woolen socks and the freckles that dotted Mike's cheeks.

They stood in the checkout line, ridiculously long and full of frazzled shoppers buying last-minute Thanksgiving dinner essentials. She watched the people in line for a while, listening to the fragments of conversation bouncing through the air. The stream of mundane dialogue wasn't entirely spoken; El caught trail of thought or a spike of emotion as it passed through the void and disappeared. The woman ahead of them, dyed, orange hair tied up in a knot on the top of her head, hugging several boxes of pre-made stuffing to her chest, wondered *when Jack's flight got in* and if *Snuffles ate his breakfast this morning* and *I need to call Molly* . . .

El turned away, shutting off the stream of mundane thoughts that weren't her own, thoughts that enter her mindscape, drawn like iron to a magnet. She doesn't do it intentionally, it just . . . happened. She could control it no more than she could control the Earth's rotation, or the weather, or the functioning of the human digestive system. But it got overwhelming, so she tried to shut it out.

El turned, glancing at Mike, who returned her gaze, lips quirked in the beginnings of a smile.

"What?"

"Nothing. It's just, you ever just look around you and realize you're surrounded by stressed-out people and you're not stressed out, and everything is moving so fast around you, but you don't give two shits? It's kind of liberating."

"Maybe?" She offered. "I guess I'm kinda stressed . . ."

Mike sighed, sympathetically. He grabbed her elbows and turned her body toward him, planting a kiss to her crown that was so sweet and soft and innocent and still sent electricity running through her, traveling down her spinal column and crackling in her fingers and toes.

"What're you stressed about?" He asked.

She looked at him, incredulous.

"Hmm, let's see . . . maybe it's the fact that I left Hop alone with your parents and I made him promise he wouldn't say anything but I know he's pissed. But it could be that your dad won't even look at me because he thinks I'm some delusional psycho that coerced you into starting a family or something . . . or maybe it's the fact that I'm eighteen and pregnant and I have no idea what I'm doing." Or so she wanted to say, but she knew it would crush him, so she just said,

"Oh, just the holidays, it's all a bit . . . overwhelming." And he looked at her like he knew she was sugar-coating whatever was going on inside her head, but he didn't press her.

"When do you want to have the wedding?" He asked, out of nowhere, and the question knocked the wind out of her. Because ever since they got engaged the topic hadn't really come up again, which was absurd because El replayed the scenario over and over in her head. And both of them had been so caught up in work and school and holidays and the baby that neither of them had any time to even think about the wedding.

"What?" She asked, hoarsely. Mike shrugged.

"I don't know. I just . . . we haven't really talked about it and the proposal was so sudden and I'm sorry I just kinda sprang it on you like that and I didn't even have a ring and I promise I've been saving up and I thought maybe if you'd changed your mind about getting married, we can always wait, and—"

"Mike." She said, cutting him off. "I meant what I said. I want to get

married. And I don't care if the wedding is tomorrow or in five years or there's no wedding at all. I want to marry you, Mike Wheeler." She stood on her tiptoes and pecked his lips, smiling. He grinned, back.

"Okay."

"I think we should wait 'till after the baby is born, though. If we're having a wedding, I don't want to look fat in my dress." She puffed out her cheeks, then giggled. "It doesn't have to be some huge thing, either. I don't need a bunch of fancy decorations or a five-course buffet or anything."

Mike nodded.

"Okay."

"And don't worry about the ring, Mike. Are you kidding? I don't care about a stupid ring." She kissed him, again. "I don't care about any of it. As long as we're together, and the baby is healthy and doing okay, I'm the luckiest person in the world."

"Okay."

"That's it, just 'okay'?"

Mike shrugged, sheepish.

"Sorry, I guess I'm still can't believe we're getting married."

"It's weird, isn't it?"

Mike nodded. "Does Hopper know?"

El frowned.

"I may have skipped that little detail when I told him about the baby. I thought maybe it'd be best to take it one step at a time."

"Probably a good call."

It was their turn to checkout. Mike paid for their stuff, and then they were walking out the door and into the fog, once more.

At home, Mrs. Wheeler seized the grocery bags out of Mike's hands and shooed them out of the kitchen. They went into the living room. El joined Hopper on the couch, pressing a kiss to his stubbly cheek. Holly sat in front of the T.V., shoveling M&Ms into her mouth by the handful. Hop was nursing his second beer. El settled herself cross-legged, reaching for the deck of cards, on the coffee table. She challenged Mike to a round of Slapjack. After a while, Mrs. Wheeler announced dinner was ready.

Mike stood at the sink, washing dishes. He was under orders to *carefully* hand wash and towel dry his mother's good china. The rest of the house was dark and quiet, and only the running water from the tap accompanied the roar of his thoughts. El left about an hour ago, though not without pressing a kiss to his cheek, promising she'd call, later that night. Dinner had been exhausting. It played out exactly as he'd imagined, full of stiff remarks and formal conversation. His father was silent and stoic, and his mother's voice grew increasingly false and shrill, and for some reason he couldn't even bring himself to look at El, who sat beside him and kept trying to catch his eye, though he'd made every effort to avoid her gaze. She wanted so badly to get on his parents' good side, to win their approval, and all of it was just so messed up and *none of it was her fault*. He wanted to scream. He wished they were somewhere else, anywhere else. And he knew if he looked at her, at that brokenness and guilt starting to show in her face, he'd explode. He was just so *angry*. So he couldn't look at her. He barely touched his turkey, and after an eternity and a slice of pumpkin pie he couldn't even taste, El and Hop left. And then it was just this big, silent house.

He set down one of his mom's fancy plates, because his hands had begun to shake and he didn't want to risk breaking anything. He shut the water off and leaned against the sink, fingers gripping the edge so tightly his knuckles turned white. He stared ahead, unseeing. Numbly, he toweled off his hands and left the kitchen, climbing the stairs. His feet carried him past his room, until he was standing outside Nancy's door, at the end of the hall. He lifted his hand, preparing to knock, then thought better of it and turned on his heel. He made it halfway down the hall before her door opened and she appeared in the doorway, eyes locking on his face with an expression

that said *let me in*. It was enough to widen the cracks, inside.

The night Will came back and El just as suddenly disappeared, he'd promised Nancy *no more secrets*. He'd broken that promise, of course, (they both had) but he liked to imagine things had gotten a little better. That year had been hard. Missing El, believing he was going crazy, slowly but surely, because he still saw her everywhere and he heard her and he felt her. Like a ghost. Nobody talked about her. Dustin and Lucas danced around the subject, and sometimes they'd mention her in a conversation and then abruptly fall silent, shooting him guilty, pitying looks, as if the mere mention of her name was enough to drive him to some sort of breakdown. In some ways, it was.

It always hurt to hear that name, and he didn't speak it aloud if he could help it. But sometimes he'd lie in bed, in the dark, chasing sleep. He'd lay in the dark and say her name, so that it was barely more than a whisper on his tongue, but it was there. It was real. He said her name so only the shadows could hear, and he willed her to say something, *anything*. He begged her to come home. *Come home. Please*. But there wasn't ever any answer. There weren't any blinking lights or things coming out of the wall. Just radio static and silence and an ache in his chest too big to fill.

Eventually, the silence was too much to bear, and he'd kept so much bottled inside that some kind of explosion was nothing short of inevitable. Everything came bursting out of him. And Nancy had been there to pick up the pieces. He'd cried, and she'd held him, and he thought maybe she of all people knew what it was like to lose someone.

He'd never seen death up close, but even when people died, at least you were allowed to talk about it. Nobody knew about El. He didn't even have a picture of her. And so he walked around with her memory filling up all the empty spaces in his head, until he couldn't concentrate, couldn't do his homework, couldn't actively join in conversations or plan D&D campaigns, like he used to. And he started to question if she ever really existed, because a lot of things happened that November that he simply couldn't explain. She'd shattered into a million pieces and left him, and more and more she felt like some supernatural force rather than a person. But then he'd

recall the fuzzy image of her face in his mind's eye, already beginning to fade, or her voice or the way her lips felt when he'd kissed her. And the reality of her would crash back down on him. Mostly it was just her voice; it echoed through his dreams.

He told all of this to Nancy, and she held him, and he couldn't stop the tears and the lump in his throat that ached and ached. After he'd cried himself out, he felt rubbed raw but cleansed, somehow. And exhausted. And maybe it became a little easier to bear, after that. She understood. It wasn't like they became the spitting-image of perfect siblings who got along all the time. They still fought, and they still kept secrets, and they still lied, but at least he knew he had an ally, in all this. She'd lived through that week in November, and she understood Mike hadn't just lost a friend, that night, but a piece of himself, too. She'd come out of it with similar scars. And when he woke, drowning in the sheets, suffocating from nightmares that hit a little too close to home, he'd sneak down the hall and into her room, climbing into her bed, feeling safer, somehow, in the presence of his big sister. But that was years ago, and now they stood on opposite ends of the hall, sizing each other up. And then Nancy asked, "wanna go for drive?" with eyes that reached into the depths of him, asking him questions he, himself, couldn't begin to answer, and he just nodded. Because maybe a drive was exactly what he needed. She got her keys, and they snuck out the front door before their parents got a chance to ask them where they were going. Nancy drove, and Mike sat in the passenger seat, looking out the window.

"You okay?" Nancy asked. Mike nodded, avoiding her gaze.

"Yeah. It's just . . . El and the baby and Mom and Dad and, just, everything . . ." He trailed off. "She's guilty. She thinks she's some kind of burden on the family or something, like she's the reason Dad isn't talking to me. She thinks it's her fault, which, of course, it isn't."

"That's bullshit."

"I know. I tried to tell her that, but she won't listen. She's stubborn."

She looked at him.

"Mike, it's all gonna work out."

"What if it doesn't?" It came out harsher than he'd intended. He took a breath, trying to collect himself. Nancy's brow furrowed.

"Because it's you." She said, simply. "Whatever you and El have, it's not your average crush, Mike, believe me."

He scoffed. Nance looked at him, face nothing but sharp edges. She cocked a brow in a way that said *I am older than you and wiser than you and you're just my dumb little brother so shut up and listen to me.*

"You aren't alone. This baby is gonna have so many people looking out for it, Mike, you don't realize . . ." She touched his shoulder, again. "You're not alone." She said, voice barely rising above a whisper. "Trust me."

They got milkshakes at a twenty-four hour diner. It was nearing midnight, on Thanksgiving, and the place was almost empty. He grabbed them a seat, in the corner. He and Nancy talked about school, about her new Medical Occupations internship, part of the nursing program at NYU. They discussed Mike and El's forecasted living arrangements, which they still needed to figure out. Though Mike still had the better part of six months to work these things out, he knew that time was gonna go by fast. When the time came, he'd much rather be settled in an apartment of their own, to eliminate that extra stress. Stress was bad for the baby, bad for El, bad for everyone involved, really, and so he wanted everything to run as smoothly as possible.

"I've been looking for a part-time job, in Indianapolis." Mike said. "You know, just to cover some of the costs. Rent is expensive, and we're gonna need to buy all new baby stuff, like a crib and diapers and everything." He licked some whip cream off the end of his straw. "I think I can fit in a few shifts a week between classes. We could use the money."

Nancy nodded.

"I think that's a good idea. But I also think you should focus on your classes, Mike. Mom and Dad will help with rent. I'm sure Hopper will support you. God knows El's got him wrapped around her pinky finger." Nancy sighed. "The point is, it's still your life. Your education

is important. Your dreams are important. You're gonna have to make sacrifices, but some things are worth fighting for. Don't throw everything away with both hands."

Mike opened his mouth to argue, closed it again, thinking.

It seemed impossible, to take care of a kid and support his family and still chase after his dreams. And what were his dreams, anyway? He hadn't been one to really think about the future. He'd always been invested in the present—in his friends and schoolwork and A.V. club. He remembered thinking it would be cool to be a scientist or an astronaut when he was a kid, but then he became Dungeon Master and he started writing elaborate campaigns for his friends, and the pictures in his head came to life on the board like some kind of magic. Sometimes he'd keep a little notebook and fill it with ideas and plots and character sketches, and it would keep him busy for hours. It wasn't until his Freshman-year English teacher, Mrs. Bradley, complimented one of his essays that he realized he was a pretty good writer, that maybe he could make a career out of his campaigns and his plots and stories.

All the crazy shit that happened in November of 1983 might've played a part, too. Those government bastards took everything from him and made it look like a freak accident, and the love of his life disappeared in a puff of smoke, and nobody knew the truth, and more and more he fought the urge to scream at the top of his lungs. Nobody was talking about it. Nobody knew what had happened to him, what happened to *her*, and nobody cared. And he thought if he could just tell somebody what happened, it might be a little easier to bear. So, he'd gone home and dug his old notebook out of the closet. He brushed the dust off the cover and eraser shavings off the pages and he picked up a pencil and wrote. He wrote about everything that had happened to them, that November. He wrote about Will's disappearance, about the rainy night they went out to look for him, about the enigma named Eleven and the tattoo stamped on her wrist and the fear in her eyes and the way his heart ached for her, even months after she'd came into his life and just as suddenly left it. He wrote about the death of Barbara Holland, about El's super powers, about the bath, the blinking lights, the government bastards, and the night his friend came back from the dead. It all came pouring out of

him, and he wrote until his hand was cramped and burning and tears were streaming down his face.

If Will drew to cope with his demons, Mike wrote about them.

After it was done, he ripped the pages out of his notebook and tore them into tiny pieces, so that no one would be able to decipher the very true story that had turned his life upside down. He tossed the scraps into the waste bin by his desk, then collapsed on his bed, body shaking with sobs and the image of El's brown eyes burned into his brain.

He was good at telling stories. He always had been, even if he didn't realize. And once he started flexing this newfound muscle, the words came easy. Never in his life had he had so much to say. Even now, amidst all the chaos, outside of classes and jobs and everything else, he still made time to write. His stories were fiction, but they still hit close to home. There was still a bit of truth, there, if you knew where to look. He realized if he was going to offer the world anything, he could offer it a story. Maybe nothing he wrote would ever cut so deep as the story he scribbled in his notebook that night—an attempt to make sense of everything that had happened to him in the only way he knew how. And he was still trying to make sense of it all, so he wrote. And the best idea he'd ever had was to try and make those stories into a career of sorts. So, when he applied to college, in the section that asked for his preferred major, he chose Journalism, knowing it would be the surest way to get to a point where he could finally tell the world the truth. So, whenever Mike thought about his plans and his future and everything in between, he always imagined he'd spend a couple hours a day behind a typewriter, chipping away at the iceberg ideas in his head. And Nancy was right. He couldn't do that without finishing his four years at IU. He also knew his diploma would help him get a job that made enough money to support their little family all on his own. He just needed to figure out how to make it through the next four years.

"I'll try." Mike said. "I promise." And he would. He wasn't about to drop out of school, but El and the baby came first. Period. He was just gonna have to figure it out.

"Don't worry about Dad, either, Mike. He'll come around. Just give

him time."

Mike scoffed.

"I think he made it pretty clear he wants nothing to do with me or El or the baby." Mike said, cursing under his breath. Nancy sighed, bone-deep, rubbing her temples.

"He's an idiot."

Mike nodded.

"But that doesn't mean he can't change. And if he never comes around, well, it's his loss. You gotta remember that."

Mike shook his head.

"At least Mom's somewhat on my side."

Nancy nodded.

"I'm on your side, too." She said, then smiled, ruffling his hair. "I can't wait to be the cool aunt."

Mike looked at her, a lump forming in his throat. He struggled to get words past it.

"Thanks, Nance."

8. Chapter 8

El woke to the first snow of the year. She caught a glimpse of the white flurries drifting past her window and sat bolt-upright. She swung her legs off the side of the bed and tossed the blankets away, rushing out of her room and down the stairs. She opened the back door and went out onto the patio, which had been covered in a thin layer of snow. The cold stung her bare toes, but she didn't care. She loved the way the flurries kissed her cheeks and clung to her lashes. She opened her mouth and caught flakes on her tongue, just as she remembers doing when she was younger. She looked up and down at the street, at the powder-white pavement and frosty rooftops and the cars and mailboxes coated in snow. El caught a glimpse of their neighbor, Mrs. Dorsey, across the street. The woman wore a fluffy, purple bathrobe. A cat stood by her, rubbing against her ankles. She waved. El waved back.

When she could no longer feel her toes, she went back inside, closing the door with a shiver. She heard voices in the kitchen. She found Mike and Hopper at the table, coffee mugs in hand. She wrapped her arms around Mike's neck, pressing a kiss to his cheek.

"G'morning." She said, squeezing his shoulders. Mike smiled. His Thanksgiving break was an entire week long, and so she got to enjoy his company a little longer, before he returned for the final few weeks of his first semester. Dustin, Max, and Lucas had already caught flights out of Indiana. Will's flight left tomorrow, and Mike was planning to stay until the following Monday. He spent most of his time at her house, but he hadn't spent the night, so she guessed he'd just shown up earlier this morning. It was almost ten, after all. She'd slept in.

She sauntered over to the stove and poured herself a mug of hot water, grabbing a tea bag. She opened the cabinet, searching for sliced bread, and popped a couple pieces in the toaster.

"It's snowing." She announced.

"Mmmhmm." Hop said, not looking up from his morning paper. He raised his mug to his lips.

El dropped into the chair beside Mike. He leaned forward, brushing a strand of hair out of her face. She ducked out of his reach, blowing morning breath in his face.

"You up for a bit of shopping?" He asked.

She quirked an eyebrow.

"Always." She said.

"I was thinking we could go down to the bookstore to buy a book on pregnancy, like your doctor recommended."

"Okay." She nodded, standing up to retrieve her toast. She grabbed butter from the fridge and sat down, again, nibbling on the crust. "I guess I'll be in the second trimester by Christmas. I think I've reached the extent of information that pamphlet can give me. It'll be nice to get some insight."

Mike nodded.

El finished her breakfast and hurried up the stairs to change. She pulled on a warm sweater and a pair of jeans, then put on a windbreaker and a beanie, to add an extra layer. She found Mike waiting for her on the landing. She stepped down to his level, gazing up at him, and he rested his hands on her hips and pulled her closer. She buried her nose in his sweater, closing her eyes, grateful for IU's semester schedule, which allowed for stolen moments like this one. Moments where she was free to lose herself in him, if for a moment, or spend the whole day with him, like she planned on doing. They'd probably go to the bookstore, then stop for a bite to eat. And then they'd come back to her place and watch *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, which Mike rented from the video store, down the street. And they'd probably talk about school and the baby and everything in between, and they'd be alright, because they were together and that was all that mattered. And all these thoughts floated through her head in the space of a second, and then he pressed a kiss to her lips and grabbed her hand, pulling her out of the door and into the snow.

The bookstore smelled of coffee and ink. El let the atmosphere surround her like a blanket, warm and content as she perused the

aisles. She traced her hand down the rows and rows of books, thumbnail running over the spines, finally locating a book titled *280 Days: An In-Depth Guide to Your Pregnancy*.

She flipped through some of the pages, then tucked it under her arm. She found Mike in the science fiction section, where he picked up a novel by Stephen King. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and steered her toward the cashier. While El dug around in her purse for her wallet, Mike insisted on paying. She shot him a look.

"It's an early Christmas present." He said, and kissed her cheek.

Once they'd finished, they made their way down the street, side by side, watching their foggy breath in the cold air. The midday sun had burned away the clouds, beginning to melt the new snowfall, turning it to slush. Occasionally, El encountered a patch of slick ice on the asphalt. Once, her feet slipped out from under her, and Mike's hand closed around her bicep, catching her fall.

"You okay?"

She nodded.

"Yeah." She said. "Slippery."

They escaped the cold and slush at the coffee shop on the corner. They sat at a table, and El sipped her still-steaming mug, and Mike reached across the table and took her hand, holding fast.

"El?"

"Hmmm?"

"I love you."

Monday came too soon for El's liking. Mike left for school, and El returned to her regular schedule at the police station, and life remained busy as ever. She spent the weeks leading up to Christmas working at the station, answering phone calls and working her way through stacks of case files, typing up old, handwritten notes and sorting through decades of useless information, organizing files

alphabetically and by importance. It was boring, tedious work, but it paid well, and El knew she needed the paycheck if she wanted to support the child she was carrying. Babies were expensive.

Of course, there were the holiday preparations. She spent an entire shift decorating the windows and walls of the station with Christmas lights and several feet of red tinsel. She spent an afternoon in the attic, at home, digging around until she found the Christmas decorations. Hop found her struggling down the ladder with a cardboard box full of ornaments and rushed to tug it out of her arms. He lectured her about the risks of climbing ladders and lifting heavy things in her condition, and she just made a face and brushed him off. She wasn't helpless. The people in her life, Hop and Mike included, had started treating her like she was glass, like she couldn't do things for herself. It was beginning to irritate her. She wasn't going to sit around on her ass and let people do everything for her just because of the baby.

Of course, it didn't help her case that she'd been extremely weepy in the week or two following Thanksgiving. She cried all the time, with the slightest provocation. Once, she'd discovered they'd run out of blueberry yogurt and started to cry, breaking down into these awful, hiccupping sobs punctuated by fits of giggling. She knew it was absurd to cry over yogurt, but she was helpless to stop the tears. Hop came home and found her on the kitchen floor, eyes wet, face all red and blotchy, and sent her to run a bath in hopes it would calm her down. El called Mike, later that night, and they had a good laugh over the look on Hop's face, after he'd found out why she was crying. He looked a bit concerned and a bit amused and a bit scared, and a lot like he couldn't figure out which one he wanted to be. After her bath, she'd come downstairs to find a brand-new pack of blueberry yogurt cups sitting on the top shelf of the fridge, and that prompted a fresh wave of tears.

That wasn't the only instance. A couple days ago, while she and Hop decorated the Christmas tree, she dropped an antique ornament, one that belonged to Hop's grandmother, and it shattered on the floor. She'd *sobbed*, despite Hop's attempts to console her.

"Don't worry, El. It's just an ornament. Accidents happen, it's not your fault." He tried to tell her, but she couldn't stop crying.

Soft, piano music, sad movies, and commercials featuring puppies were enough to set her off.

The weepiness faded, somewhat, as El hit the second trimester. As Christmas grew nearer her tendency to fall to tears at the drop of a hat faded, somewhat. Although she was still pregnant and therefore still prone to mood swings and emotional instability, she no longer felt like this hormonal gorilla with tear ducts that felt more like running faucets.

Maybe it was the holiday festivities, or getting to see her friends again, or the fact that Mike would be home for winter break for three weeks, but she found herself enjoying a burst of energy she hadn't felt since, well, since she got pregnant. She almost felt like her old self again, with less of an urge to fall asleep on the couch amidst piles of empty pudding cups and orange peels, but to head to work at the station and tackle that unruly stack of papers she'd been avoiding for months, or to take a trip to the shopping mall in Roane City to buy Christmas gifts for her friends and family. Morning sickness didn't assault her as much as it used to. The terrible case of acne she'd been battling had cleared, somewhat. She just felt . . . good. Comfortable in her own skin, excited for the months to come, and inexplicably, undeniably connected to the tiny life inside her. She was more attuned to her body, more aware of what was going on inside her uterus. The mental link between them had never been so strong, and she reveled in it.

She told Mike all this when he asked her "how's the baby?" as they talked over the phone. She sat in bed with her back propped against the headboard, phone sandwiched between her shoulder and her ear. She lifted her shirt, revealing the curve of her lower abdomen. She'd begun to show.

"I swear, Mike, it happened overnight." She'd explained, over the phone, recalling the night she'd gone to bed with a flat(ish) stomach and woken up to a definite baby bump, modest but visible. A little pregnancy pouch that lined her waistline, like a crescent moon. It stuck out a little, and when she pressed on it, it was solid and hard. It took some getting used to, and she'd spent the morning in search of a shirt loose enough to conceal it. She wasn't quite ready for the world to see her. Not yet, at least.

"Other than that, nothing much has changed. I have another prenatal appointment tomorrow, but my doctor said it's just a routine checkup, and it won't take that long. I know you have a class tomorrow, and finals coming up. I don't want you to miss it."

"El," Mike began, sounding reproachful.

"Mike." She retorted, cutting him off. "Don't worry. Hop's going with me. It'll be fine. It's literally gonna take like a half an hour."

"Fine. Let me know how it goes, though, alright? I want all the details."

"Okay." She said.

"Promise?"

"I promise." She crossed her heart with her finger, then realized he couldn't see her, since he was on the phone, so she said, "cross my heart, hope to die, I promise."

"Okay." He said, letting the subject drop. Instead, he launched into a story about his roommate, who fell in the shower last weekend and broke his arm. As he talked, El switched the phone to other ear and stretched out, so she was lying on her back, hands cupping her little bump, fingers stuffed beneath the waistband of her shorts.

"He stumbled in from some party at like two in the morning, and I had a paper to finish so I was up late. And he's all shit-faced and decides he's gonna take a shower, and I'm sitting there and I hear this big crash, and I rush into the bathroom and he's on the floor, his arm's already swelling and it's bent a weird way, and I'm like there's no way it's not broken. I managed to get some clothes on him, and I drove him to the Emergency Room. I've got him in the passenger seat, and he's incoherent at this point. Just groaning and mumbling stuff, and he turns his head and pukes on me!"

El laughed.

"Urgh, gross!"

"I know, right? It was legitimately disgusting. And I'm white-

knuckling the steering wheel, swallowing my vomit. There's bits of half-digested french fries and God knows what else on my shirt, and it stinks to high-heaven. And I'm sitting there trying to think what on Earth I did to deserve this."

Mike laughed.

"I get him into the ER, and I have to sit with him until they find him a room, and there's puke on my shirt and I'm in a terrible mood, right? I mean, c'mon, this is a big inconvenience and I have this big assignment due in less than six hours and it's not finished, and the coffee at the hospital tastes like shit and there is fucking puke on my shirt, so I'm not having a great time. I mean, really, it can't get much worse."

"Is he okay?" El asked.

"He's fine. He fractured his radius, and I guess it was a significant break, because they had to set it. It wasn't pretty. He'll be in a cast for a few weeks."

They lapsed into a full, comfortable silence.

"Listen, there's this party on Saturday night. A lot of people from my classes will be there. Maybe, if you want, you can make the drive on Saturday morning and come with me?"

"Ooh, a college party." She said. "Sounds like fun."

"Yeah. It's supposed to be really great. A kind of last hurrah before finals start, next week. After that, I'll be home."

"Sure." She said. "I'll drive up on Saturday."

"It's a date." Mike said. She could hear the smile in his voice.

"It's a date." She echoed.

"Okay, Jane, if you'll step on the scale for me." Doctor Simmons asked, balancing the contraption so it read zero. El bent to untie her scuffed Chuck Taylors, then straightened and stepped on scale in her

socks. She watched the number climb. Simmons nodded, making a mark on her clipboard.

"Looks like you've put on about six pounds since I saw you last."

El cocked an eyebrow, puffing out her cheeks.

"Ugh."

Simmons smiled.

"Don't worry. That's normal. You're almost sixteen weeks along, which means your baby is about the size of an avocado. Your uterus is stretching, making room. It's normal to gain some weight." Simmons assured her. "The normal net gain during pregnancy is somewhere between twenty and thirty-five pounds. Six is nothing to worry about."

"If you say so." El said, stepping down from the scale.

"Now that you're well into the second trimester, you'll want to be consuming a few extra calories."

"That won't be difficult." El said. "I'm hungry all the time."

"That's expected. But you also have to remember that you don't need to eat as much as you think you do. You're shooting for an extra three-hundred calories or so, per day, to meet your mark."

El made a face. Simmons laughed, touching her shoulder.

"C'mon, it's time to check your blood pressure."

After she finished, Simmons led El into the exam room, where she instructed her to lay down on the table.

"I'm just gonna feel your abdomen, alright? I'll take some measurements, and then we'll try to find the baby's heartbeat. Sound good?"

El nodded, laying back.

"Lift your shirt, for me." She did.

"I'm going to press down a bit, okay?" El nodded, steeling herself for the unfamiliar touch, something she still struggled to grow accustomed to after so many years in that lab, with so much unwanted, uninvited touch and hands that were rough and cold. Hand that poked and prodded. Unfriendly, unforgiving hands. Simons felt El's abdomen, where she'd begun to swell with new motherhood. It was tender and aching, but Simmons was gentle. Her fingers were warm, not cold, as El expected.

"Yes, there's definitely some swelling. Sometimes it's just gas, but I don't think that's the case. I can feel the top of your uterus, right here." She pressed her index finger under El's belly button. "It's a muscle, so it's hard."

"I didn't have a bump a week ago. It happened so fast!"

"That's normal. A lot of mothers 'pop' quite suddenly. At that point, the uterus is beginning to rise above the pubic symphysis. It's stretching and growing. It can't hide behind those bones anymore."

Simmons continued to press and prod.

"Have you felt any movement?"

"No. Should I?"

"Not necessarily. Every pregnancy is different. I think you should expect to feel movements any day now. They'll be small, at first. And most first-time moms don't feel movements until later on, between twenty and twenty-five weeks. I wouldn't worry."

El nodded.

"Your bump will continue to grow, over the next month or two and beyond. It's probably time to start shopping for maternity clothes, if you haven't already."

El sighed, overwhelmed.

"This is happening." She said, blowing out a breath.

"This is happening." Simmons confirmed, nodding. "Congratulations, Momma-To-Be."

El smiled. Simmons made a note on her clipboard, then began to measure El's fundal height, whatever that meant, making notes along the way. When she finished, she set her clipboard aside.

"Okay, stay put. I'll be right back." She left, and returned a few minutes later with a little contraption in her hand. She handed it to El.

"This is a fetal doppler. It's gonna allow you to hear your baby's heartbeat. You place this over your abdomen, here," she said, pressing the end on El's bare skin. She moved it around, testing the different places, and El held her breath.

"There it is." Simmons said, smiling.

A rhythmic *whooshing* sound came out of the machine, and El laughed, a smile stretching across her face. At ten weeks, it was too early to hear the heartbeat. Now, though, it was clear as day, steady and strong. Tears gathered at the corners of El's eyes as she listened to that sound, gooseflesh crawling over her arm. Simmons noted the BPM on her clipboard.

"Isn't that amazing?"

El nodded.

"It's an incredible experience. I've been doing this for fifteen years and I still think there are few things in the world that beat hearing a baby's heartbeat for the first time."

El laid a hand over her bump, feeling a rush of adoration for her unborn child.

"You can buy one of these to use at home, too." Simmons said, brandishing the doppler. She set it aside, then picked up her clipboard, ruffling through the pages.

"Well, Jane, everything's looking good. Your tests are normal, your blood pressure is normal, your baby's got a good, strong heartbeat. I'd

say that's something to celebrate." She said, smiling. "Let's schedule your next appointment in about four weeks, say, second week of January? By then, you'll hit twenty weeks, and we can do the mid-pregnancy ultrasound. That's when you can find out the sex of the baby, if you're dying to know."

El nodded, sitting up. She scooted off the exam table and stooped to collect her belongings.

"If you have any concerns, call me. In the meantime, stay active. Keep up a nutritious diet and buy some maternity clothes. You've got a bump, now. It's only gonna get bigger."

"Everything's getting bigger." El said, with a frown, glancing at her swelling breasts and fingers and toes.

Simmons laughed and put a hand on her shoulder, showing her toward the door.

Loud music, smoke, and laughter assaulted El as Mike led her over the threshold and through the throng of people crowded in the entryway. People were packed into every corner, talking and dancing, clutching plastic cups in their hands. As they entered, some people greeted Mike, waving or clapping him on the back. Someone pushed a plastic cup into his hand, then offered one to El. She took it, to be polite. Mike, still clutching El's hand tightly, pulled her through the living room and into the kitchen, where he joined a group of people gathered around the sofa. She recognized Nick and Matt, some of Mike's friends he'd introduced her to during her last visit to the campus. She greeted them, and they seemed glad to see her. Nick put an arm around her shoulders, and the circle effortlessly expanded to include her, making her feel welcome and safe, and she decided she could get along with these people—these people, who were Mike's friends even if they weren't the Party. She took in their faces. Most she didn't recognize. A tall boy with dark hair and light eyes, and a cigarette dangling from his lips. His name, she would later learn, was Collin. A tall, brunette girl wearing heavy makeup introduced herself as Cassidy.

"Just call me Cass." She said. "Everyone does."

"I'm Jane." El said, shaking the girl's hand.

"I like your dress." Cass said. El smiled, glancing down. She was wearing a black slip, patterned with purple flowers. The fabric gathered at the waist, effectively hiding her bump.

"Thank you." El said. "I like yours, too. Where'd you get it?"

"Oh, I think it was a birthday gift." She said, waving her hand, as if the subject was beneath her. El couldn't agree more. She never understood the kind of discussion that the other girls at school engaged in, over clothing and hair and makeup. She knew it fell under the category of acceptable conversation topics, though she didn't understand the attraction. Clothes and makeup were of no interest to her. Usually, El just wore a sweater and a pair of jeans. As far as makeup went, she preferred a modest hint of black eyeliner, nothing more.

Cass mumbled something about needing a drink and stalked off in the direction of the punch bowl. El's cup reeked of liquor, so she set it down.

El followed the flow of conversation with interest, interjecting only when addressed directly. She'd never been a conversationalist. The subject traveled from finals to plans for winter break to second semester classes, and El was content to listen. Mike took her hand, and they communicated silently through squeezes. She was unreasonably at ease, with the music so loud and so many strangers crowded in such close proximity. A couple years ago, she would've broken down in a panic attack. But Mike was by her side, grounding her. The music reverberated through her very bones and set her entire being on fire. She loved the way she could feel it in her body, the beat keeping time with her heart. She liked Mike's friends, and she liked the energy, the excitement. And the secret she hid behind a swath of black fabric stirred up a kind of euphoria, within her.

Eventually, the group wandered out of the kitchen and into the living room, where a game of beer pong had been going on for the last hour, or so. She watched, a little nauseated, as a bigger guy with long hair chugged two consecutive drinks and belched. Someone bumped into her, and she stumbled forward. The boy who'd knocked her

didn't seem to notice. He was yelling, cheeks flushed, clutching his drink in one hand, his other arm in bright, neon cast. She glared at him.

"Danny!" Mike yelled. The kid turned, then caught sight of Mike.

"Mikey, my man!" He yelled, grinning. Mike put an arm around El's shoulders.

"This is Jane, my girlfriend." He said. "Jane, this is—"

"Your roommate." El interjected, the corner of her mouth twitching. Danny offered his hand, and El took it. "Nice to meet you."

Someone rushed up, tapped Danny on the shoulder, and said something in a voice so low El didn't catch it. Danny turned, yelled something, and shuffled off, nearly spilling his drink on El's dress. Mike pulled her aside, rolling his eyes.

"He's an insensitive little shit, but he means well." He said. El laughed.

"Wanna dance?" He asked. El nodded. He pulled her into the corner, and she wrapped her arms around his neck. They began to sway, moving fast to match the upbeat tempo of some Tears for Fears song. The song ended, and the silence left a buzzing in her ears, and Mike leaned forward and started kissing her neck, making her laugh. He laughed, too, and his breath tickled her skin. He lifted his head, took her face in his hands, and kissed her. Long and deep, drawing her in like a tide, robbing her lungs of oxygen. The warmth in her chest grew, spreading throughout her body. He smelled like beer and laundry detergent, and she breathed him in. He broke the kiss, and she leaned forward, pulling him closer. His hands found her hips, the growing bump beneath her dress. (He'd been so excited when she showed up at his door and he saw her bump for the first time. They hadn't seen each other in almost three weeks, and in that time her belly had swelled from a little bit of a baby pouch to an unmistakable, graceful curve.) He rested his chin on the top of her head, and she closed her eyes. They swayed. Slower, now, ignoring the music. El sighed.

Content.

It was a good word. A word to describe peace and happiness. It matched exactly what she felt, right now, wrapped in his embrace.

Yes. *Content* was just the right word.

Eventually, Mike excused himself to use the bathroom, and El ventured into the kitchen. She snacked on the assortment of chips and dip. Two guys stumbled into the kitchen, obviously drunk. They caught sight of her, and she heard one of them whisper under his breath. He straightened, approaching her.

"Hey, beautiful." He said, leaning close. His breath reeked of liquor. "You look lonely."

"I'm waiting for someone." She said, coolly, taking a step back. He took a step forward, smirking an ugly sort of smirk.

"Are you a freshman?"

"I'm visiting." She said, shortly, feeling a kind of panic tug at the roots of her stomach. He was standing awfully close, and there was a hunger in his eyes she didn't like.

"Wanna come back to my place?" He asked, in a low, soft voice. He touched her arm. "I'll give you a tour."

His hand moved from her arm to the collar of her dress and slipped under the fabric, and she wanted to move but she couldn't think, couldn't breathe. Then his friend said something, something she didn't quite catch for the pounding of blood in her ears, but somehow it broke the spell, and her fight-or-flight response kicked in. She grabbed his arm, wrenching herself away from him. With a flick of her chin, the drink he was holding in his other hand spilled down his front. He swore under his breath, preoccupied with his drink, and El seized the opportunity to dart away, fleeing the kitchen.

She nearly collided with Mike as he crossed the room on his way back from the bathroom. By then, tears were beginning to burn her eyes. He caught a glimpse of her face, and his smile disappeared.

"El, what's wrong?" He said. He reached for her face, dabbing at the blood on her upper lip with his thumb. His frown deepened.

"What happened?"

She shook her head, biting back the tears. She felt all breathy and out of control, and everything was moving so fast around her. She swayed on her feet, unbalanced, and Mike's arm looped around her shoulders, protectively. She clung to him.

"Nothing, it's . . . I'm fine, it's stupid . . ." She babbled.

"El, you're shaking." Mike said, brows knit with concern. "C'mon, let's find someplace less crowded."

They ended up on the porch, and El turned her back to him, glancing up the street, covered in snow. She shivered. Her breath rose in white clouds, then dissipated in the black sky. She started to tell him what happened, and her words tumbled in a rush.

"Did he touch you?" Mike said, sharply. Fire flashed behind his eyes. "I'll kill him."

"It's fine, Mike." She said. She pressed her fingers over her eyelids, drawing several, deep breaths. "I don't need you to fight my battles."

"It's not fine." He said, taking a stride toward her, catching her elbows.

"I should've moved sooner, I just . . . I panicked." El said.

Mike touched her cheek, and the hard edges fell away from his face.

"Let's go home." He said. She'd never been gladder for that suggestion in her life. She suddenly couldn't stand being here, in this house, in such close proximity with a mouth breather who'd treated her like a piece of meat.

Mike bid his friends a hasty goodbye, and they set off down the street. El shivered, rubbing her bare arms. Mike peeled off his jacket, wordlessly, and draped it over her shoulders.

"Thanks." She said.

Mike's dorm was a few blocks down, so they'd decided to walk. It was a good idea, considering Mike definitely had a few drinks in him and the walk wasn't bad. El's back ached, and so Mike offered to give her a piggyback ride. She accepted the offer, and he hauled her the rest of the way back to the dorms. He climbed the stairs, unlocked the door, and deposited her on the bed like she was a sack of potatoes. She laughed, squirming under his weight as he leaned over and kissed her, but lost his balance and fell forward. Their mouths crashed together, painfully. She groaned.

"Ow."

"Sorry." Mike muttered, and she laughed. He laughed, too. She grinned up at him, plucking at the buttons on his sweater. She loved him this way, so bubbly and warm, not drunk but getting there. Some of the worry lines that occupied his face, lines he was too young for, disappeared. He wore a mischievous smirk.

"Scoot over."

She did, and he climbed into bed with her, wrapping his arms around her middle and pinning her against him, ensnaring her. She wriggled, trying to wrestle out of his grasp, but he just tightened his grip, breath tickling the back of her neck.

"Stay." He said, sleepily, so she stopped struggling. And they lay there, fully clothed, smelling like smoke and liquor, and El let herself fall into a kind of stupor that wasn't quite sleep. His breathing evened out. She could feel the rise and fall of his chest, pressed against her back, and when she'd decided he was asleep she wriggled out of his embrace and crossed the room, digging around in her overnight bag for a toothbrush. When she turned around, he was kneeling in the center of the room on one knee. In his hands, he held a small, velvet box. He opened it. The diamond ring inside, simple and delicate, glinted.

"Mike." She blurted.

"I've been saving up." He said, shrugging. She sank to the floor, on

her knees.

"It's beautiful." She breathed, vision blurring with tears. She gazed into his face, at the tears shining in his own eyes. And she thought this was just like him, to catch her off guard like this. To make her feel beautiful when she was sweaty and bloated and feeling decidedly unglamorous. To give her that grand proposal she'd dreamt of when she was a silly teenage girl with a crush, who watched one too many soap operas and had a knack for dramatics.

"I wanna do this right, so," He began, drawing a shaky breath. "El Hopper, will you marry me?"

9. Chapter 9

During the night, El pulled Mike close and kissed him, overcome with need. He opened his eyes, sitting up in surprise, before giving in, honoring her voiceless request.

"You're insatiable." He muttered, against her lips.

"Shut up."

Then there were no clothes between them, and he laid her down and kissed her like she'd never been kissed. She'd fallen asleep wrapped in his embrace, feeling the tremors leave her body, and a certain fullness. Like electricity, like a breath of air.

It took her a long time to love her body.

She was nothing but an experiment. Her body was just a vehicle for her brain, the piece they needed. The piece they'd molded and excavated and manipulated. She'd accumulated scars, over the years. From the beatings, the needles, and the times she'd dug her fingernails so deep into her palms or the soft skin of her forearms in an attempt to anchor herself in some semblance of reality, as monsters and men battered at the walls around her mind. There were the bruises, trailing after rough, unyielding fingers. There was the sting of an open palm on her cheek, the countless accounts of physical abuse.

And then there were the scars you couldn't see. The scars left in her mind, in her memories. Those scars took longer to heal. A lot of memories from the lab remained fuzzy, distant, as if she was viewing someone else's life as an outsider. A lot of the pieces were warped or missing completely. She would later learn, from her therapist, or an excerpt in her high school psychology textbook, that this was a common side effect of trauma. A coping mechanism. She'd looked up the word in the dictionary.

To cope, to deal effectively with something difficult.

Once she'd put distance between herself and all the trauma, the

pieces fell back into place. She began to understand the enormity of what they'd done to her, the things they'd stolen from her. The pieces of her they'd touched—mutilated and ruined. Lying there, in the darkness, she could still feel each one of those pains like a physical wound.

It took her a long time to love her body.

Every time she looked in the mirror, she saw the monster they made her. She saw the shell of a person, a scared little girl riddled with scars. Damaged goods. Less than human.

With time, it got better. The scared little girl became a strong, young woman. The sharp edges of her face grew softer, gained some color. She got taller, her hair grew out and began to curl. The wounds scabbed over and began to heal. The scars faded. The shadows that pooled in her eyes gave way to something clearer, brighter.

For the first time in her life, she knew what it was to be loved. To feel safe. To have friends, a family. But every day was an uphill battle. There were times she sat in the bathtub and scrubbed her skin raw, trying to feel something because all that scar tissue had made her numb. There were times she broke down, screaming at things inside her head.

New scars joined the old ones. A skinned knee, after Max tried to teach her to ride a skateboard and she'd fallen on the asphalt. A sprained ankle. A black eye. Scars that painted over the long history of abuse with carefree, childish accidents.

She loved the things her body could do. She loved each curve and every scar. She loved the way it felt when Mike touched her. The spaces between heartbeats and the brush of fingertips trailing her spine awakened a whole spectrum of colors behind her eyelids. When she was with him, he made her feel beautiful. Each kiss made her feel new, remade. He taught her how to love her body. He taught her that her body was much more than a vehicle for a weapon. When they crossed the line that separated just kissing and something more, she discovered her body all over again. When she learned about her pregnancy, she marveled at its resilience.

It may have been riddled with scars, but it was still capable of love. It was still capable of feeling something other than pain. It was still capable of bringing new life into the world.

After they'd finished, and Mike's breathing evened, she stared at the ceiling, thinking of the thousands of scars etched in her skin. She was more than those scars. She was strong. She was beautiful. She was art.

Fiddling with the ring on her finger, she drifted off.

They woke up slowly, staying in bed, trying to fight the numbers on the clock as they climbed upward. Mike's roommate, Danny, hadn't returned, and El wasn't keen to run into him if he did show up, in the sober light of day. The bed was warm, however, and Mike's arms encircled her, making her feel safe, so she allowed for a few more moments of stillness before nature (and pregnancy) called her away from him, and she went to the bathroom to relieve herself. The baby was pushing on her bladder more and more these days, it seemed.

She returned, pulling one of Mike's hoodies over her head and slipping into a pair of jeans. He gazed at her, eyes begging her to stay, to come back to bed, but she just knelt by his side and kissed him.

"I have to go." She whispered, pushing his hair back from his forehead.

"No, you don't." He said, voice roughened with sleep. She turned, shouldering her overnight bag. Mike caught her wrist, finger pushing against her pulse.

"El."

"Mike."

She held his gaze, until Mike cast his eyes away and El knew she'd won the battle. He slid out of bed and began to dress, but not before pressing a kiss to her forehead.

A rush of frigid air met her as she opened the door and stepped out

into the snow. She pulled her coat tighter around her shoulders, ducking to avoid the bitter wind as it bit at her cheeks. Joyce's Pinto waited in the street, and she rushed over to the passenger side and opened the door, climbing in.

Joyce smiled.

"Hey, sweetie."

"Hey."

"How're you doing?"

"Good." She said.

"Excited for winter break?"

"Yes! Mike's coming home next Tuesday. I can't wait to see everyone."

"How's our little bun in the oven?" Joyce asked, patting her belly.

"The baby's doing good. I'm not as tired as I used to be." She smiled.

"Everything's good."

"Good."

Joyce volunteered to take her shopping for maternity clothes. El accepted the offer, glad to spend some time with Joyce, the mother she never had. Plus, Dr. Simmons was right. Her clothes were snug, and her options were quite limited. In another month's time, she wouldn't be able to hide it any longer. El wondered if it was just her brain playing tricks or if she actually looked that big. Standing in the mirror, looking at herself from the side, her belly poked out in a definitive curve.

Hop noticed. He'd made some comment, but she'd shut him up with a glare. He meant well. She'd pass him in the hall or on her way out of the kitchen, and he'd rub the place where her baby grew, affectionately. Instances like this were enough to prompt a wave of tears. She asked the universe what she'd done to deserve him. Her dad, who'd found her in the snow and given her a home and safety—a new normal. Who'd risked his life for her. Who'd given her the kind

of love she'd never known from Brenner. She couldn't begin to put into words how grateful she was. He was handling this better than she could've expected, and she counted her lucky stars.

She'd told him about her engagement, the day she came home from Indianapolis.

"I know." He said.

"What?" She asked, dumbfounded.

"Mike asked for my blessing, a few weeks ago." He said. "Seems a bit old fashioned, if you ask me."

"And?"

Hop shrugged.

"Who am I to disapprove? You kids are old enough to make your own decisions. Hell, you're having a kid together. I support it."

She threw his arms around his neck, choking back a sob of relief.

"Thank you." She'd told him, pressing a kiss to his cheek. "For everything."

They drove out to the shopping mall in Roane City, about a half-hour away. El took her time, picking out soft, stretchy shirts and sweaters. Joyce held up a cute, black top.

"Black is slimming." She said, holding it up for El's inspection. "You look good in black." Joyce winked. "It suits you."

El took it.

"Pretty." She said.

She took an armful of clothes to the dressing rooms, stamping down the twinge of panic that came whenever she found herself in small spaces. She tried on the first item, a horrible, checkered blouse.

"C'mon, I wanna see." Joyce called, and El unlocked the door, making

a face.

"It looks like a tablecloth." She said. Joyce snorted, with laughter. Eventually, she settled on a variety of items she liked. She took it to the cashier, an older woman with dark hair and severe features. She threw El the kind of disapproving, pitying look with which people regard young mothers, and El felt the blood rush to her cheeks. She dropped her eyes to the floor, burning with shame.

When her stuff had been paid for, she and Joyce got lunch at a deli on the corner. Joyce tried to get her to talk, but she remained quiet and distant throughout the remainder of their outing. She couldn't get the cashier's face out of her head. She kept chewing over the memory, feeling nauseous. Joyce seemed to know something was bothering her. El avoided Joyce's soft, questioning eyes, and she didn't pry.

It wasn't until El told Mike about it later, that she began to feel better.

"Don't worry about it, El. There's nothing to be ashamed of. If people don't like it, then screw 'em. It's none of their business."

They talked long into the night, until they ran out of things to say and she fell asleep with the sound of his breathing, imbued with static, whispering in her ear.

Christmas preparations kept her busy. Between shifts at the station, El wrapped gifts and baked Christmas cookies. Hop got home, one night, shaking snow from his hood, to find El buried under scraps of wrapping paper, wrestling with a spool of ribbon.

He sat on the floor, next to her, and tugged the ribbon from her hands. They finished wrapping gifts, then stayed up late and watched holiday movies until she couldn't keep her eyes open and Hopper switched the T.V. off.

She dreamt, that night, of falling snow and frosty rooftops and hearths full of glowing embers. She woke to a full bladder and hands that found their way underneath the waistband of her pajama pants, resting over her bump, during the night.

She talked to it, sometimes. In the darkness, tracing patterns over the curve of her belly, she told the baby about its family—Mike and the party and Grandpa Hop. In the darkness, she'd half-whisper, half-sing renditions of "Kid Fears" under her breath.

Mike got home on Friday night. They decided to catch dinner and a movie, and then they went back to Mike's place and hung out in the basement. On Christmas Eve, the party got together to exchange gifts.

On top of a stack of comics and a new coat, she received an assortment of baby stuff, in preparation for her little one. Dustin gifted her a fuzzy, blue hoodie, which she adored, and Will gave her a pair of little sneakers that lit up, in the dark. She smiled, hugging them each in turn. Dustin knelt, so he was level with her stomach. She giggled.

"We can't wait for you to join the party officially, little guy." He said. "When do you find out if it's a boy or a girl?" He asked.

"January." She said.

"When's your due date?" Max asked.

"Early May."

Later, after the party left and Hop had retired to bed, El and Mike retreated to the recliner, by the fire. It was way too small to fit both of them, but they lay there, anyway, with their legs entwined and temples resting together, flipping through the pages of the day-by-day pregnancy guide they'd bought. By her calculations, it was roughly day one-hundred-fifteen of her pregnancy.

"Your baby can hold its head upright. Its facial features are becoming more defined, and many of its internal systems, such as the digestive and circulatory systems, are beginning to function." She read, aloud. "By the end of week sixteen, your baby will be roughly five inches long."

When her eyelids grew heavy, she closed the book and set it aside, and they fell asleep in that chair, waking only as gray, morning light filtered through the window.

On Christmas morning, El, Mike, and Hop opened the rest of their Christmas gifts. Mike bought her one of those at-home fetal dopplers Simmons told her about, and she fumbled with the box in a hurry to open it. She leaned back, lifting her shirt. Mike squeezed her hand as the sound of their baby's heartbeat floated out of the device. He took her face in her hands and kissed her.

"Incredible." He breathed, and she just nodded, overcome with emotion.

All of them, Joyce and Jonathan and Nancy and the Party, even Steve, gathered at the Byers' house for dinner. Jonathan snapped dozens of pictures. She'd examine, later, unable to keep the smile off her cheeks as she recalled memories of this Christmas. She ate until she thought she might explode, and then the party piled into Will's room and built a blanket fort so large it put the old one in Mike's basement to shame. She fell asleep sandwiched between Mike and Dustin, surrounded by a safety net of several familiar, warm bodies and the sound of their breathing.

All in all, it was a good Christmas, one of the happiest in her memory. She thought of her first Christmas. Her first *real* Christmas. She'd helped Hop cut down a Christmas tree, and they'd decorated it together. It became a tradition, after that, but that first tree held a place in her heart. They'd spent Christmas Eve at the Byers household, and on Christmas morning the entire party visited her in the cabin and gave her a Super Com of her own, so she could communicate without having to dip into the shadowy pools of her mind. She'd never had a proper Christmas. In the lab, the day came and went without a hint of tinsel or fairy lights. There were no trees, no presents, no cookies or Christmas carols. That Christmas had been nothing short of magical, for her. Full of firsts.

There had been others, of course. Mike's family invited her on a vacation into the mountains for her second Christmas. She remembers having in epic snowball fights and sledding down the big snow bank outside their cabin. She remembers sharing a room with Nancy, and, in the middle of the night, sneaking down the hall to crawl into bed with Mike. She caught him by surprise; when he opened his big, dumb mouth to exclaim, she'd just clamped a hand over his lips to shut him up. She remembers falling asleep, nestled

into his side, every nerve in her body hyper-aware and buzzing. In the morning, Mrs. Wheeler found them sharing a bed. She hadn't been happy.

When she was fifteen, somebody thought it was funny to hang a bough of mistletoe above the doorframe leading into the Wheeler's kitchen, and she and Mike somehow ended up under it, and he'd kissed her until both of them were breathless and blushing and Dustin was pretending to throw up.

Yes, it had been a good Christmas. One of the best.

New Year's came and went. Fireworks and midnight kisses and glasses of champagne (sparkling cider for El, because, well) ushered in a new decade. She cheered as the ball dropped in Times square on the T.V. and laughed as Dustin and Lucas broke their poppers and blew sound makers, making the neighbors' dog bark. Will hooked his elbow under her arm, and they danced around the kitchen until she couldn't breathe for laughter.

On a frigid Wednesday in mid-January, Mike drove to their next appointment. He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel, but the beat wandered astray from the song playing on the radio, and El knew his mind was elsewhere. She reached over, laying a hand on his knee. It stopped bouncing.

"What're you thinking about?"

"Hmm?" He asked, absently. She just shook her head, looking out the window.

"Never mind."

They lapsed into silence. El tore her eyes away from the frosted trees along the roadside and looked at him.

"Do you wanna know the sex?" She asked. "We can always ask to be surprised."

Mike shrugged.

"It's up to you."

El glanced out the window, again.

"I want to know." She said. It came out quieter than she'd intended. But it was true. She wanted to know. Badly.

Mike thought it was a girl; he was keen to remind her, on several occasions. El couldn't help thinking, though she had no scientific evidence, that it was a boy. Just instinct, she guessed. Whether her instinct could be trusted or not, she'd find out soon enough.

Mike smiled.

"Okay."

They waited in the lobby, and Mike knotted his fingers in the spaces between her own and brought them to his mouth, planting soft kisses to her knuckles. A nurse called her name, and Mike accompanied her as they completed the usual tests, just checking off the boxes. Weight, blood pressure, everything. Simmons greeted her in the exam room, and they ran through the usual question and answer routine, and then she instructed El to lay down in the big, cushy chair, by the monitor.

"Alright, here we go!" Simmons said, excitedly. She spread gel over El's bump, then pressed the wand against her skin, tapping commands into the computer. Mike squeezed El's hand. Her brows shot up.

Their baby looked like, well, a baby. El could see the distinct shape of its head, could see the bridge of its nose and its little fist, tucked under the chin. She smiled, battling a rush of euphoria, trying to reconcile the tiny thing they'd seen on the monitor, earlier in the pregnancy, with the image she was looking at, now.

"Would you like to know the sex?" Simmons asked, looking at her with a mysterious, knowing smile. El nodded.

Dr. Simmons smiled, pausing for effect.

"It's a girl."

El dreamt of the void. She floated endlessly through the black abyss, wandering through pools of murky water that lapped against her ankles. It went on forever. There was so much space, so much cold, empty, nothingness around her. A ripple disturbed the water, and El froze, straining her ears against the vacuum of silence. She wasn't alone. There were things lurking beyond this veil of black. Things with sharp teeth and cold, reptilian skin and breath that stank of death and decay. She began to run, crashing through the water, sending a spray of droplets in every direction. She wound up on her hands and knees, exhausted, sobbing and screaming at things inside her head.

El woke with a jolt, legs tangled in the sheets. She sat up, hugging her arms to her chest. She was drenched in sweat, though she felt cold. She stared into the darkness, drawing lungfuls of air, trying to slow her racing pulse. Blindly, she reached for the lamp on her bedside table and turned the switch. She swung her bare legs out of the sheets (she'd fallen asleep in nothing but her underwear and one of Mike's old hoodies) and sat on the edge of the bed, head bowed, catching her breath.

This wasn't the first time she'd returned to the void in her dreams. It wouldn't be the last. The nightmares still plagued her, but they didn't leave her shaking and screaming, like they used to. She scarcely cried out. Instead, she gritted her teeth and drowned in the sheets, in visions of a place that was devoid of anything but blackness and silence. A cold place. A dark place. She woke with her jaws aching and her clothes sticking to her, drenched in sweat.

El got to her feet, went to the bathroom, and drank a few swallows of water straight from the tap. She straightened and turned off the faucet. She'd started back to her room when she felt something stirring, within her.

It was nothing more than a flutter, small and unmistakable. Butterfly wings. She gasped, lifting her sweatshirt and laying a hand over her belly. She held her breath, pressing her palm over the place she'd felt her baby move. Another flutter, stronger than the first. She laughed.

"Dad!" She yelled, standing in the doorway of the bathroom. She

leaned against the frame. Her voice dropped to a whisper.

"Hey, little girl." She said, in a soft, hushed tone. "Whatcha doing in there?"

"Dad!" She called, again. Footsteps thundered down the hall, and Hopper appeared in the doorway, wearing boxer shorts.

"What's wrong?" He asked.

"She's moving." She said.

"What?" Hop said, rubbing his eyes.

El rolled her eyes, grabbing his hand. She guided his palm to her lower, right side. Another flutter, distinct and undeniable.

"She's moving around." El grinned. "Feel it?"

"Yeah." He said, gazing at her. "Yeah, I feel it. Just barely, but I feel it." He laughed, shaking his head. "Jesus."

She beamed at him.

"I have to tell Mike!" She said, rushing across the hall, to her bedroom.

"Can't it wait 'till morning?" Hopper said, exasperated.

"No, I promised I'd call if anything baby-related happened."

"It's three o'clock in the morning, El."

She ignored him, dialing Mike's dorm. She fumbled with the receiver, fingers shaking.

"Hello?" Mike asked, voice roughened with sleep and confusion.

"Mike!" She blurted.

"El?" His voice sharpened, and she didn't miss the note of panic in it. "What is it? Is everything okay?"

"Yes, everything's fine." She assured him. She paused, a beat, for effect. When she spoke, her voice is barely a whisper.

"I felt the baby move."

"What?" He yelped.

"Yeah, I just . . . I woke up and I felt this tiny little flutter. But it's her, Mike, I can feel her."

"That's incredible." He said, excitedly. "What's it like?"

"It's hard to explain." She said, massaging her stomach. "It's not like a big kick or anything, it's just a little twitch, really small . . ." She trailed off. "It's so weird."

"I wish I could've been there." He whined. "I'm supposed to be around to support you when stuff like this happens, El, I—"

"Mike." She interjected. "Don't worry. Hop's with me. He felt her, too. It'll happen a lot more, trust me."

"I know." He said. "I can be there in an hour?" He offered, half-joking.

"She settled down, I think." El said, rubbing her belly. She hadn't felt another movement since he'd picked up. "Really, Mike, don't waste the gas. We still have a long way to go, this won't be the last time she moves."

"How 'bout I visit this weekend, then? My professor cancelled our class on Friday."

"I have to work on Friday." She said.

"Good, I'll visit you at the station." He said, as if that settled it. "Maybe Flo will let me steal you for the afternoon, and we can grab a coffee or catch a movie, or something."

"Okay." She said. A beat. "I can't wait."

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

He hung up, and El sat at the edge of the bed, both hands pressed on either side of her growing bump, chewing on her lip. Hop, who'd been standing in the doorway, crossed the room and sat on the bed, beside her. The springs creaked, under his weight. She leaned against him, resting her head on his shoulder. He put an arm around her.

"Need anything, before I go back to bed?" He asked, gently.

"No, I'm fine." El said.

"If I'm lucky, I might squeeze in another hour or two's worth of sleep." He looked at the clock and huffed, exasperated. "I'm too old for these late-night escapades."

El giggled, albeit a bit guiltily.

"Her terms, not mine." El said. "Sorry I woke you."

"Nothin' to be sorry for." Hopper assured her. He scratched his chin, absently.

"Is she still moving?"

"Not anymore." El said.

"Don't let her keep you up. You should rest." He said.

"I won't." El promised. "She's calm, now."

Hop nodded. He ruffled her curls, pressed a kiss to her forehead.

"Night, Ellie."

"Night, Dad."

El spent the remainder of the week counting the days to Friday. She got better at detecting the baby's movement, and El began to recognize a pattern. She liked to move during the night. Often, the tiny, fluttering movements were enough to wake El from her restless

slumber, and she'd lay in the darkness with her hands pressed tight against her stomach, feeling the baby move and stretch its limbs, unable to keep from cracking a smile.

Her, El corrected herself. She'd been overjoyed to find out about their little girl, struck with a kind of wonder that she thought most mothers with daughters probably felt.

A little girl.

Just like her.

Mike was even more excited than she was, if that was even possible. He'd pulled her into a tight embrace, and she could feel his smile against her cheek.

"I was right." He said. "It must be some kind of Spidey-sense. Like, dad-intuition." He snapped his fingers. "Dadtuition."

"Is that a thing?"

"Yes?" Mike said. "Point is, I knew it all along."

"Oh, you're gonna play that game?" She asked, rolling her eyes. "Is this the part where you say *I told you so*?"

"Told you so." Mike deadpanned. El smirked, waving her hand.

"You had a fifty-fifty shot." She said. "It was a lucky guess."

When she told Hopper, he asked what Mike thought. She told him, and he just laughed.

"I wouldn't be surprised if the kid has him wrapped around her little finger the second she's born, if how he acts around you is any indication." He shook his head. "Hell, he looks at you like you put the sun in the sky." He chuckled.

El smiled. A secret smile. Mike was already enamored with their little girl. If the way he talked to the baby and kissed her bump and reminded her, constantly, to minimize stress and eat enough dairy, was any proof.

"I was smitten with Sara the moment I laid eyes on her, and it didn't take long for you to have me at your every beck and call."

El grinned. It was true. He was no match for her if she decided to pull the puppy-eyes trick, when she really wanted something. She knew he'd die for her, and she'd do the same.

She'd called their friends and told them the news. Nancy cheered, over the phone. Joyce had been ecstatic, pulling her into a hug.

"Oh, sweetie, I'm so happy for you!"

"God knows we've got enough testosterone around here." She remarked. "Of course, I raised two boys, so I've got next to no experience in this department." She poked El's side, affectionately. "I guess I can't credit myself with raising you, but I've always considered you my daughter." A lump gathered in El's throat, at her words. She hugged Joyce, tightly, touched beyond words.

The other day, the police department staff had thrown her a party of sorts. They'd surprised her with bunches of balloons and streamers. Pink, of course. Flo made cupcakes adorned with little roses made of icing, and Steve handed her a box, tied with ribbon, which she discovered contained an adorable, polka-dot onesie and a stuffed kangaroo.

"If you ever need a babysitter," Steve said, with a wink, "rumor has it I'm a pretty damn good one."

She hugged him, eyes brimming with tears.

On Friday, her workload wasn't bad. Flo brought her knitting to the station, and she spent her lunch break attempting to teach El simple patterns. It was a futile task, really. In the end, Flo sported the impeccable beginnings of a knitted hat, for the baby, while El wrestled with a gigantic tangle of yarn. She yanked at a knot, and it would unravel to reveal another, bigger knot. She grumbled, frustrated, and set down Flo's extra set of knitting needles.

"This is impossible." She groused, glaring at the lumpy thing, lying on the desk. It was supposed to be a scarf, but it didn't look like much of

anything.

"Not impossible." Flo said, gently. "It just takes patience, sweetheart. You'll get the hang of it."

"Doubtful." El muttered, under her breath.

The station's front door swung open, letting in a gust of frigid, January wind, and in tromped Mike Wheeler. He pulled off his gloves, shaking the snow out of his hood. He caught sight of her, and his face broke into a grin.

"Hey." He said. He leaned against the desk, and El stood, standing on her tip-toes to peck her lips.

"The weather's pretty bad." He remarked. He caught her hands and pressed them to his cheeks.

"You're freezing." She said. She took his hand, raising it to her lips. She breathed on it, to warm it up, enfolding it in both of hers. He craned his neck, catching sight of the yarn and knitting needles, strewn across the desk. He cocked an eyebrow.

"I didn't know you could knit."

"I can't." El said, making a face. She shifted, blocking his view of the desk in an attempt to hide "scarf" she'd made, but Mike lunged for it. He turned it over in his hands, eyebrows disappearing under the shock of dark curls that fell over his forehead. El blushed, snatching it back.

"It's harder than it looks." She defended herself, shutting down the sarcastic comment she knew danced on his tongue. He opened his mouth, closed it again, eyes alight with amusement.

"It's . . . good?" He offered. She sighed, stuffing the tangle of yarn in the top drawer of her desk.

"Forget it."

"Hey, no, I'm serious. It's good, El. Really good." Mike said. She covered her face with her hands in mock-embarrassment. She didn't

really care about the knitting, but she liked to see him squirm.

"Stop." She whined. "You're just saying that make me feel better."

Mike grabbed her wrists, lowering her hands from her face.

"Friends don't lie." He said, each word punctuated by a kiss. One on her forehead, the tip of her nose, her lips. "It's good."

"I suck." She sighed, in despair.

"No, you don't."

She looked at her feet, pretending to contemplate if she wanted to believe him.

"Okay." She said, giving in. Mike laughed.

"How was the drive?" She asked.

"A nightmare." Mike said. "It's a goddamn blizzard, out there. I don't have snow tires, so I had to drive really slow, to avoid hitting a bad patch of ice. The traffic was terrible."

"Jesus." She breathed, stomach turning as the image of Mike's car, upside-down and buried in a snow drift, flashed in her mind's eye. The scream of sirens, slick ice . . .

"Stay." She said, squeezing his hand. "Until the bad weather clears up, at least. Mike, if you get in a bad accident . . ." She trailed off, biting her lip.

Mike nodded, somber.

"I'll stay."

"Promise?" She demanded.

"I promise."

Flo, graciously, gave her the rest of the afternoon off. El hugged her, gushing her thanks. Her appreciation for Flo increased exponentially the more she got to know the woman. Flo's approach to most things

in life was strictly *no-bullshit*, and she knew how to handle herself quite well in such a male-dominated environment. She wasn't an officer, but she sure as hell ran the show. She could always be counted on for a good story. When El was finally introduced to the world as Hopper's long-lost daughter, and she was allowed to go outside, she'd spent entire summers helping out around the station before they started handing her a paycheck, for it. And a lot of those hours were filled up in Flo's company, listening to her talk about her childhood, her grandchildren, or her dog, Nelson.

Flo's homemade baked goods were stellar. Hopper claimed Flo's cooking, alone, was the reason he couldn't shave off those extra ten pounds. On top of it all, she always seemed to know when something was bothering El, and she knew exactly how to fix it.

When El got in trouble at school for picking fights with mouth breathers like James or Vince or Alice Cleary (God, the mere mention of that name was enough to make El's blood boil), and she got detention and didn't want to tell Hopper, Flo seemed to know something was wrong. This was, of course, before Hopper enforced the *words first, fists second, powers never* rule. Flo pulled her aside and asked her, gently, what was wrong. Something in Flo's voice, in her face, in her kind eyes, hit home. El dissolved into tears, confessing everything like it was some awful secret.

When the nightmares were particularly bad, or November rolled around and the anniversary of all the awful things that had happened left everyone a bit on edge, Flo brought word puzzles she cut out of the newspapers to the station, and El would sit with her feet propped against the desk, chewing on the end of her pencil in concentration.

When El found out about her pregnancy, and she was figuring out how to ride the rollercoaster of jumbled emotions bubbling under the surface, she'd mixed up one of the file cabinets by mistake and broke down. Whether it was the hormones, the frustration, or her ongoing struggle with eloquence, or all three, she didn't know. And the sideways, pitying looks she got weren't helping. She mopped her face, trying to conceal the tears. Flo ushered her into the breakroom. She sat El down and made her a cup of tea, giving her a kind of sad, knowing look that made El wonder if Flo suspected anything. If she knew, she didn't say anything. El was grateful.

El grabbed her coat, bidding Flo goodbye. She slipped her fingers into Mike's hand.

"What d'ya say we just go back to your place?" He asked, as they approached the parking lot, face screwed up against the cold.

"Okay." She said. It was the best idea she'd heard all day. Her back ached, her feet were swollen, and the unpleasantness outside made her want to do nothing else but curl up on the couch under a pile of blankets and fall asleep. So, that's exactly what they did.

As she lay with her back against the cushions, fiddling with the drawstrings of his hoodie, Mike propped himself on one elbow and brushed his fingers through her hair. Slowly, gently, he eased her shirt up, revealing the curve of her belly. He planted kisses over her waist and belly button, touching his lips to the stretch marks that crawled over her skin. El sighed, letting her eyelids flutter closed.

"Hey, little girl." He said. A kiss. "It's me. It's Dad. I'm excited to meet you. I can't wait to hold you and read you bedtime stories and take you to the park and go on all kinds of fun adventures." Another kiss.

"She's moving around a lot, lately." She told him. "Usually at night, though. The minute I fall asleep, she starts doing somersaults."

"Good excuse for me to spend the night." Mike remarked, quirking a smile. El looked at him, sticking out her bottom lip.

"What, your beloved's yearning arms aren't a good enough excuse?" El teased.

"Who said anything about yearning?" He retorted. He took her face in his hands, face softening. "Don't be coy." He said, thumb grazing her cheekbone. "You'll always be enough."

She punched his shoulder.

"That's the sappiest shit I've ever heard."

"It's the truth." Mike said.

He smiled as he kissed her. El kissed him back, trying and failing to

suppress her laughter. Torrents of giggles erupted out of her mouth, interrupting the kiss. As Mike pulled away, exasperation and amusement written in his expression, the baby moved. El froze.

"She's moving." El hissed. She seized Mike's hand, pressing it against the place where she felt those flutters. A smile stretched across his face.

"I feel it." Mike said, in hushed tones, as if speaking above a certain decibel might frighten their little girl. El smiled, squeezing his hand. Mike traced circles over her skin with the pad of his thumb. She moved, again, responding to his attentions. El giggled.

"It feels weird." She admitted, wrinkling her nose to keep from laughing as she felt another, ticklish movement.

Mike blew out a breath, awestruck. He kept his hands on El's belly, and the baby continued to tumble around, stirring faint, flickering movements in her womb. El couldn't shake the feeling that the baby was, somehow, aware of her parents' presence. Aware of the love that surrounded her.

"Incredible." He whispered.

El nodded. They lapsed into silence, and the baby's movements calmed, somewhat. El felt a twitch, here and there. Nothing else. El closed her eyes. The wind battered against the sides of the house, making the walls creak. A fire popped and crackled in the hearth. Mike continued to press kisses along her body—her stomach, her knuckles, her neck. These sounds lulled her into a sort of stupor. She probed the mental link she shared with their baby—the bond that had only strengthened over time. *Contentment*. Her word of the day, week, whatever. From what she could gather from the stream of consciousness that ran parallel to her own, her little girl was content. Calm, tranquil, happy.

You and me both, she thought, with a sigh. Mike eased onto his side, so they shared a pillow, his nose almost brushing her cheek. She gazed at him, losing herself in the tides of those dark, deep irises, in the freckles that splashed across his cheeks; they formed constellations, if you looked close enough. She'd mapped each one,

over the years.

"Let's just stay here forever." She said.

Mike smiled.

"Okay."

She nodded, surrendering to the heaviness weighing on her eyelids. She drifted off, into a content, dreamless slumber.

Bright, mid-morning sun filtered through the curtain. It burned the back of El's eyelids, and she rolled on her side with a grumble, pulling her blanket over her head to keep out the sunlight. She tried to escape back into the welcoming arms of sleep, but it was futile. Hop was banging around downstairs, doing God knew what. Her mind was already awake and buzzing. Mike was dead weight beside her, fast asleep with one arm slung over her chest. She wriggled out of bed and crept downstairs, in time to catch Hop as he headed to the station to cover for Cal, who'd called in sick.

"There's pancake mix in the fridge, if you're hungry." He said, kissing her forehead. "Behave."

"Bye."

He grabbed his keys and his hat and left. El listened as the Blazer's engine roared to life and she heard the scrape of tires pulling out of the driveway.

She and Mike spent the morning lazing around. They watched a couple episodes of the Brady Bunch, and Mike painted her toes, and then El suggested they go for a walk.

She bundled up under several coats and sweaters, wearing two pairs of socks on each foot and fur boots. The temperatures had dipped below freezing, overnight. Though the snowstorm had passed, the bitter air still stung El's cheeks. Snow drifts higher than her waist coated the ground, dusting the trees and rooftops. She slipped her gloved hand into Mike's, pulling her collar up to cover her mouth. They trudged through the snow in silence. The snow muffled every

sound—the crunch of ice under foot, the gentle tinkling of icicles melting in the midday sun, and distant sound of a car engine. No one seemed to be stirring on this bitter, bright day in January.

When Mike spoke, his voice seemed too loud, too sharp, breaking the quiet.

"I'm thinking about dropping my Biology class."

"What?"

"It's my afternoon class on Mondays and Fridays. I was thinking, if I drop it, I can drive to back earlier on Fridays. That way, I'll beat the traffic, and we'll have more time together. I don't have a class on Monday mornings, so I won't have to leave on Sunday. I can stay another night, and—"

"You shouldn't drop a class." El interjected. She stopped in her tracks. Mike looked at her, eyebrows cocked in surprise.

"El, it's no big deal. I'll still have enough credits to graduate in time. Especially if I plan on taking summer classes." He reached for her hand. "Really, it's no big deal."

"It's a big deal." She said, quietly, turning away from him. Her chest felt like it was splintering, breaking apart. She couldn't look at him.

This wasn't supposed to happen. He wasn't supposed to drop classes. They'd agreed to make this work. He'd stay in school, and she'd stay in Hawkins, until other arrangements were made. And now he wanted to drop classes. What was next? Would he drop out of school, completely? Abandon everything, for her? Work some five-to-nine, soul-sucking job to pay off bills?

Of course he would. She was talking about the boy who'd jumped off a cliff to save his friend. Who'd thrown himself between her and the Demogorgon. Who'd risked his life to set fire to the Hub, if it meant buying her a few more seconds. Who was the strongest, bravest person she knew. Of course he would.

And where would that lead them? Would he resent her for it? Would they, God forbid, end up like Karen and Ted Wheeler, who never

spoke? Who slept in separate beds and faked their marriage in front of everyone else? Who invited a silence so big and empty in that house at the end of the cul-de-sac, who let their children fall through the cracks between them?

She knew what went on in the Wheeler household. She knew they hadn't sat down for a family dinner in months, years. She knew his parents either ignored each other completely or argued incessantly—there was no in-between. Mike expressed his frustrations to her, on occasion, and the things that came out of his mouth were enough to make her want to wrap him in her arms and never let him go. At the same time, she wished she could seize Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler by the shoulders and scream at them until some sense made it past their thick skulls. Maybe marital issues could be fixed, but that required effort on both ends. And God knew "staying together for the kids" wasn't always the best option.

Would she and Mike end up like that? With a house at the end of the cul-de-sac, and a silence they couldn't break? Would they sleep in separate beds? Would their kids seize the first opportunity to escape to a friends' house, unable to stand the bickering? Would she smile a plastic smile that didn't reach her eyes and lock herself in the bathroom and finally let that smile slide off her face? Would she sit on the toilet and let the tears fall? Would she keep the tap running, so no one would hear her weep?

God, she hoped not. And all these thoughts flashed through her head in milliseconds, making her blood run cold, stirring up panic so real and immediate she found it hard to draw a breath.

"El," Mike began. "I *want* to do this. I want to be here when things happen. I promised I'd be here for you and I intend to keep that promise. I can't be in two places at once. I can't be present and supportive if I'm seventy miles away. It doesn't work." He fell silent, inspecting his shoes. When he spoke, his voice was quiet, distant. "I thought you'd like the idea. I thought you'd be happy that we'd get to spend more time together."

El looked at him, aghast.

"It's not like that, Mike. I didn't say that, I . . ."

El bit her lip, turning away. She was trembling. She clenched her fists, trying to conceal the shaking in her hands. It wasn't that she didn't want to spend more time with him, she just didn't like thinking that the time he spent with her was time spent at a cost. At the cost of his future. At the cost of that perfect little vision of the future where everything worked out the way it was supposed to.

Everything she'd feared, everything she'd chewed over, at the very beginning, was staring her in the face. It was all falling apart, this illusion that they could actually make it work. That they could play house and pretend to be prepared to raise a child when they were still children, themselves. How foolish she'd been, how naïve . . .

"El, look at me."

She did.

"College, a career, all that's bullshit, anyway." He laid a hand on her bump. "This is all that matters." He reached up, running a thumb over her chapped, bottom lip. "Everything else pales in comparison."

"Your dreams are important, too." She said. "Your plans, your future. Mike . . ." She pleaded.

"I know. But you and the baby come first." He swallowed. "It's only going to get harder."

El laughed, but the sound was empty and cold.

"You're right." She said. Her voice didn't sound like her own. "It's only going to get harder. But that doesn't mean you have to put things on hold for me, Mike. I've got Hop and Joyce. I'm not alone." She shook her head, wrenching her hand from his grasp. "Don't do this for me. It's still your life. Don't throw it away. Don't . . ." She trailed off, frustrated, once again lacking the vocabulary to adequately express all those fears, all the hopes she had for him. She hated watching her rainbows-and-butterflies version of their future crumbling to dust.

It wasn't supposed to be this hard. They weren't supposed to be dealing with stuff like this. They were just kids . . .

"I'm not throwing it away." He retorted. "I'm finding a work-life

balance." A stab at humor, one that fell flat. She sighed, pressing her fingers over her eyelids.

"That's bullshit."

"No, it isn't."

"Yes!" She screamed, shrilly. Her eyes filled with tears. She bit them back, furious with herself. "If it weren't for the baby . . ."

"Don't." Mike snapped. "Don't blame this on yourself, on the baby." He pressed a hand to her cheek, forcing her to meet his gaze. "This is my choice."

"You don't understand—"

"I understand." He said. "I know you think you're a burden. That you're this ball and chain I'm dragging, behind me." He shook his head. "That couldn't be farther from the truth."

"Mike," she began.

"I'm not finished." He said. He towered over her. His eyes demanded her attention, and his hands ensnared her—one spanning her jaw, one resting over the place where their baby grew. "This isn't your fault. You're the best thing that ever happened to me. This baby . . ." He trailed off, voice thick with unshed tears. "This baby is the best thing that ever happened to me."

"Mike . . ." El shook her head, reaching up to grab his hand, resting on her cheek. "We can make it work. We'll figure it out. There's gotta be a way to make it work." She sucked her bottom lip, mind racing. Searching for a solution, an answer . . .

"What if I move in with you?"

10. Chapter 10

"You . . . you want to move in with me?" Mike said, weakly.

She nodded.

"Yeah, I mean, it makes sense, doesn't it?" She asked.

If Mike moved out of the dorms, and they got a cheap apartment somewhere close to the campus, that fixed the majority of the problem. They would no longer have to make the long-distance thing work; there would be no more long drives or long calls. That saved a lot of gas money. Mike could keep going to that class. Plus, he'd have time to work on the weekends. The downside: El would have to leave her job at the police station, and the remaining members of her support system. But she could make that work. She'd get a job in Indianapolis. She had a couple years of administrative and secretarial experience under her belt. Hopper and Joyce would be a phone call away, or an hour's drive, depending on the situation. And she couldn't resist the idea of living with Mike, of sharing their own space and their own bed. They were raising a child. They were engaged, for God's sake. She couldn't think of a single valid reason to keep living under separate roofs. Or in separate cities, for that matter.

"Yeah." Mike said. "Yeah, totally. I was . . . I actually assumed we'd move in together at some point. Ideally, before the baby's born."

El nodded, a little overwhelmed, yet happy all the same. A smile stretched across her face.

"So, we're really doing this?"

"Yeah." Mike said, and laughed. "I'm sure we can find an apartment in Indianapolis. We set aside a day to look at some places, check out our options."

She nodded.

"My parents will disapprove of course, but screw 'em."

"Hopper's gonna freak."

"Probably." Mike conceded, with a sigh.

He took her hand. They kept walking, trudging through the layer of powder that coated the street. They reached the end of the road and turned back, toward her place.

She tried to imagine Hopper's reaction when she told him they were moving in together. He'd freak out, for sure, but she hoped he'd at least see the logic behind it. It made sense. Period.

He'd always been protective of her. He'd kept her hidden for year, almost two, and she knew he would've kept her hidden for another ten years if he had even a shadow of a doubt. The older she got, the more she began to understand his motives. The more she recognized the necessity of those three hundred and fifty-three days she spent in hiding. He still overreacted whenever she missed her curfew. She knew he still drove past the lab whenever he was scheduled for a nighttime patrol, checking for any signs of a disturbance. A light in the window, perhaps, or guards stationed at the gate. All remained quiet, thankfully, but he was ever the paranoid.

She wondered what how he'd react when she told him she was leaving the nest. This was new territory for both of them. She'd lived her entire life in Hawkins, and Sara never made it to her eighth birthday.

She told herself, over and over again, that this wouldn't change anything. He'd always be her dad, and she'd always be his daughter. It was just a part of life. It was what people did, when they grew up. They moved out, started their own lives. For El, who's life had been anything but normal, the prospect was as exciting as it was satisfying. Rarely had she used "normal" to describe the strange, chaotic, and sometimes life-threatening course of events she called life.

El resolved to put off telling him until they cemented a more concrete plan. Right now, she and Mike were merely entertaining an idea—daydreaming, more than anything. She wouldn't tell him until they found a place to live, at the very least. She wanted this to go as smoothly as possible. She needed him on her side. Though she had a fair amount of money saved up, she was going to need all the help she could get. Rent was expensive. Babies were even more expensive.

Money aside, she didn't want to jeopardize whatever it was they had. She wanted his support in this decision to start the next chapter of her life. He'd give her a beautiful little normal; as normal as was possible, considering. He'd raised her, cared for her, protected her. He'd been a teacher and a parent and a confidant, and she'd never be able to repay him. The last thing she wanted to do was destroy everything they'd built over the years.

"We'll need a two-bedroom apartment. The baby should get her own room, don't you think?" Mike asked, entwining their fingers.

"Mmhm." El agreed.

"And we'll get to share a bed." He said, with a smile. "No parents, no roommates, no interruptions. Just us."

She kissed him.

"I can't wait."

The more she thought about it, the more she fell in love with idea of them doing their own thing, starting their own chapter . . .

And it meant she'd finally leave Hawkins. While it would always be home, and the place where she'd met a freckle-faced dork and his band of nerds, the place where she'd learned the meaning of the words *friend* and *promise*, it still had its fair share of shadows and monsters. It was still the place she'd been stolen from her mama, stripped of her identity, poked and prodded like a lab rat. She'd be glad to be rid of the town's shadowy grip.

The following weekend, El drove to Indianapolis. She met Mike at his dorm, and she'd barely knocked when Mike opened the door and ushered her out, closing it behind him.

"Danny's girlfriend's in there." He explained, making a face. "They're sitting on his bed watching bad rom-coms and eating popcorn out each other's hands."

She wrinkled her nose.

"Gross."

"I know. Let's get the hell out of here before they ask us if we want to have a foursome."

They took the stairs two at a time. She climbed into the passenger seat of his car, and he pulled out of the driveway. He reached over, opened the glove compartment, and withdrew a folded newspaper.

"There's some local housing listings in there. I figured we'd check out this one first." He said, pointing at the ad. "It's a quarter-mile from campus, so you can't beat the location."

"Rent?"

"Manageable."

El nodded.

They parked in the guest lot. The landlord greeted them, introducing himself John Rivera. He shook their hands. He was tall and gangling, with glasses that kept slipping down his nose. He ushered them into the elevator and went up to the second floor, showing them an empty apartment.

El glanced around. It was nice and spacious, with a kitchen and living area, one bathroom and two, small bedrooms. There was a closet for storage, and a balcony, overlooking the street, below.

"The kitchen's complete with a refrigerator, oven, stove, and microwave. Each bedroom has a closet, and you'll find an extra storage closet down the hall, on your left. Each floor is equipped with a communal laundry facility. We have a gymnasium and a swimming pool, open for use." Rivera explained.

As Mike discussed rent and facilities with him, El walked down the hall, exploring the bedrooms. Apart from the kitchen appliances, the apartment was unfurnished. She thought about the old sofa in Mike's basement. The boys found it at a garage sale, in the summer of '86—it was squashy and unreasonably comfortable, after so many years of use. But it was neglected, as of late. It would be put to better use here. Hop's grandfather's cabin had become a storage space for all their discarded junk after he'd bought the house they currently lived

in, and El was sure they had a few chairs or a coffee table or a lamp lying around somewhere. She imagined all their old, mix-matched furniture filling up the room, making this place feel a bit more like home.

The bedrooms were spacious enough. El walked into the smaller of the two, pausing in the middle of the room. They'd put a crib along that wall, a changing table on the other . . .

She swallowed, hard, rubbing her belly.

"What d'you think, baby?" She asked. "This is where you'll sleep, where I'll read you bedtime stories." The corners of her mouth twitched. "This'll be your home." El smiled, imagining all the firsts. First Christmas. First birthday. First steps, first words, everything.

They returned to the first floor, and Rivera handed them an application and a business card.

"Fill this out. If you have any questions, you can reach me at this number." He said, tapping the card. "We look forward to hearing from you."

"What d'you think?" Mike asked, as they walked hand in hand down the steps.

"It's nice." She remarked.

The second complex they visited was located across the city—a ten-minute commute to school, for Mike. Twenty, with traffic. But it featured a lower rent and more square footage, and there was a daycare center within walking distance—a necessity, with a baby on the way.

They'd visited three other apartment buildings by the time they called it quits and got lunch downtown, at a burger joint Mike swore by. El snuck onion rings off his plate, ravenous.

"Which one's your favorite?" El asked him, eyes flicking over the apartment listings in the newspaper. Mike considered her, a moment.

"The second one. It was nice, and it had a good rent. Lots of space."

He nodded. "Plus, there was that daycare on the corner."

El nodding, thumbing through the pages.

"What about the commute?"

"It's not that bad." Mike said, waving a hand. "If the choice comes down to it, I'll take the cheap rent over a ten-minute drive, any day."

"You have to factor in gas money." El pointed out. Mike shrugged.

"The lower rent more than makes up for it, if you run the numbers."

"I liked the first one." She said. "With the balcony."

"The rent is high." He said, with a sigh.

"I think some of the apartments in that second building, what's the name . . . the one on Costello Avenue. . . I think some of those places had balconies."

"Probably costs more." El said, making a face.

"If you want a balcony, we'll find a place with a balcony." Mike said, mouth twitching. "Only ze best, for my fiancé."

"It's not a deal-breaker." She said. "If we're together, that's all that matters. Right?"

He leaned forward, kissing her.

"Right."

Over the next week, she and Mike hashed out the logistics over the phone. He submitted an application for the complex near the daycare. Meanwhile, El brainstormed the best way to break the news to Hopper. Part of her wanted to put it off as long as possible. *Until move-in day, preferably*, she thought, with a sigh. The other part of her knew, from experience, that it was always better to rip off the band-aid and give him time to process. So, she cornered him as he was clearing away the dishes after dinner.

"Can I talk to you, for a minute?"

Hop turned off the faucet, throwing a dishtowel over his shoulders.

"Okay." He said. He glared at her, suspiciously. "You're not pregnant, are you?"

"Har har."

"Seriously, what's up?"

"I'm, uh . . ." She swallowed, inspecting her shoes. "Mike and I are thinking of moving in together."

Hop looked at her. She caught a flicker of warring emotion cross his face, before he put up his walls and his face hardened—stoic and unreadable, as ever. She knew him, though. She knew the nature of the thoughts that ran through his head. Fear and paranoia battled his resolve to support her, to give her space, to let her make her own decisions . . .

Maybe it was intuition. Maybe it was telepathy. Or maybe she just knew him like kids know their parents.

"Okay." He said.

"Um, we're getting an apartment in Indianapolis, close to the campus. The long-distance thing is hard, and it's only going to get harder once the baby's born, and we just think it's best, you know . . ." She trailed off.

Hop nodded. He took a seat at the kitchen table. She dropped into the chair, beside him.

"I mean, nothing's set in stone, but Mike and I think it's a good plan. It's only logical, I mean, we want the baby to grow up with a proper family. One where her parents don't live in separate places. We're getting married. I guess it just makes sense that we live together."

Hop nodded.

"Makes sense."

Relief flooded her.

"So, you think it's a good idea?"

He searched her face.

"It doesn't matter what I think." He told her. "I just want you to be happy, El. If this is what you want, then I'm all for it."

El nodded.

"Yes." She said. "Yes, it's what I want."

"You're old enough to make your own decisions. Part of being a parent is knowing what's best for your family." He took her hand, running a thumb over her knuckles. "If this is what's best for your family, then there's no reason it shouldn't happen."

She smiled.

"Thank you." She whispered, swallowing the lump in her throat.

"It's gonna be hard watching you leave the nest." He said, with a smile. "But I always knew this day would come. I guess I just hoped it wouldn't come so soon."

"You're not losing me for good, you know." She reminded him. "I'll find plenty of excuses to visit. Plus, little girl's gonna want to spend lots of time with her favorite grandpa." She said, massaging her belly.

Hop laughed.

"She better. It's gonna get real lonely without a little brat hanging around."

El shoved him, playfully.

She helped him with the dishes, then rushed upstairs to call Mike, telling him the good news. He one-upped her with something even better.

"I just got a call from the landlord." He said, excitedly. "We got the

apartment."

"Shut up!" El cried, clutching the phone. "We got it?"

"We got it."

The were scheduled to move in to the apartment in two weeks. She spent the remainder of the weekend packing. She tucked all of her belongings in cardboard boxes labeled with a sharpie. She combed through her extensive collection of books, boxing her favorites and resolving to donate the rest to the library. She packed away her turntable and vinyl, thumbing through albums by Fleetwood Mac, Madonna, and Bruce Springsteen. She went through her drawers and sorted her clothes, packing the vast majority in the suitcase at the foot of her bed. She stuffed the rest (several, old t-shirts that didn't fit her anymore; a pair of sneakers falling apart at the soles; a hoodie with a mustard stain) into a trash bag. She sorted through piles of stuff, setting aside several Star Wars action figures, board games, and comics she didn't want. She designated a large, cardboard box for all the baby stuff she'd accumulated, thus far. She folded the onesies and baby clothes and tucked them away, safely, along with the kangaroo Steve had given her and the little bear amongst all of Mrs. Wheeler's stuff. She found the other, one-eyed stuffed bear that had once belonged to Sara and, after a moment's hesitation, packed that away, as well. One could never have too many stuffed animals. She stared at the contents of the box, stomach sinking to the floor.

She was still so unprepared. They still needed a crib and a changing table and all that baby stuff. El pinched the bridge of her nose, overwhelmed. She had little more than four months left. How was it that time went by so fast? She didn't know what she was doing. She'd scarcely even been around babies, let alone had any idea how to raise one. It wasn't like she had any choice in the matter. She laughed, to herself, staring at her bump, which was getting so big she had to crane to see her toes. She wasn't ready, and though Joyce would assure her that no one ever felt ready to become a parent, she wished she was at least going in with a little more knowledge. The book Mike bought her detailed the pregnancy in all its big, round, bloated glory, but she had no idea what to expect *after* the kid arrived. Being pregnant was a walk in the park compared to caring for a kicking,

screaming infant. Who was she kidding, anyway? She wasn't equipped to be a mom. Not even close. And what if she screwed up? What if she did something wrong?

El blew out a breath, trying to fight her way out of the tightening thought-spiral.

Baby steps, she reminded herself, pushing those worries away.

Mike visited Hawkins the following weekend to pick up some things from his house. El went with him. Mr. Wheeler was at work, and Mrs. Wheeler was at book club, leaving them alone. Almost alone, if it weren't for . . .

"Hey, Holly." El said, as the youngest Wheeler rushed down the stairs, taking the steps two at a time. Holly smiled, hugging her.

"Hi, Ellie." She chirped. "How's the baby?"

El wasn't quite sure exactly how she found out about the baby. Maybe Mike told her, or Karen and Ted, or maybe she just kind of knew, all along. El wasn't surprised. Kids were smart. They figured stuff out, eventually. And if Holly didn't know already, she absolutely knew now, because El was huge.

"She's good." El said, with a smile.

"Can I feel her?"

"Maybe." El said. "Put your hand here." She instructed, taking the girl's hand and placing it on her bump, over the soft, thin cotton of her shirt.

"I don't feel her." Holly pouted, with a frown.

"Be patient." El said. On cue, the baby kicked.

"Feel that?"

Holly nodded, eyes widening.

"She's saying 'hi'. She knows it's you." El said, with a laugh. Holly

beamed. On Friday, Flo and everyone else at the staff held her a going-away party. She stuffed herself full of pizza and breadsticks, played card games with Cal and Powell, and chatted with Steve until darkness fell and it was time to leave.

She said her goodbyes, and Flo handed her a box, tied with ribbon. Inside, she found a booklet of knitting patterns, some yarn, and knitting needles. El smiled, hugging her.

El laughed. Flo handed her another, smaller package, which held the little, pink knitted hat she'd been working on. El's eyes filled with tears.

"Thank you." She said. "For everything."

"Keep in touch, sweetheart."

El promised she would.

She'd cleaned out her desk, earlier that morning, and Steve offered to carry her stuff out to her car. She let him, watching their feet as they trudged down the snowy walkway. He set the box in the passenger seat, then pulled her into a hug. He squeezed her shoulders, tightly.

"My offer still stands, you know." He said. "If you ever need a babysitter, I'm your man."

"Thanks, Steve."

"Bye, weirdo." He said, ruffling her hair. "Don't be a stranger."

It was one of the hardest goodbyes she'd ever had to say, even though she knew she'd see him again. Even though he was only a phone call away.

"Wouldn't dream of it, loser."

El watched the *Welcome to Hawkins* sign grow distant, in the rear-view mirror. She exhaled, slowly, a bittersweet taste on her tongue. Already, she could feel the town's shadowy grip loosening its hold on her. Already, it was easier to breathe. Yet, as she watched that sign

disappear as they rounded a bend, she knew she'd miss it. It was her home, after all. It had put her through every kind of pain, every shade of happiness. It had given her scars, but it had given her a family, too.

She glanced at Hop, caught him looking at her with a stupid expression on his face. She knew he put on a brave face, most days. But beneath that façade, he was all fluff and sentimentality. She elbowed him, playfully.

"What?"

"What?" He echoed, mouth twitching.

"What're you thinking?"

"I'm thinking I can't believe my girl is leaving the nest."

She rolled her eyes.

"You sure this is a good idea?" Hopper went on. "I might have a heart attack, or something. I might die of loneliness."

El snorted, derisively. "Bullshit."

"Hey, watch the language." Hopper said, half-joking.

El grinned, looking out the window. Hopper stole another glance at her, unable to believe it. That this woman, sitting beside him, head full of dark curls that fell past her shoulders, pushing a wad of bubble-gum around her mouth, singing along to the radio, eyes and nails painted black . . . this woman was once the starving little girl he found in the woods, one Christmas Eve. Starving in more ways than one. Thin and cold and lost.

When she announced her intentions to move in with Mike, Hopper hadn't been surprised.

He knew she wouldn't stay forever, that she'd eventually move on to bigger, better things. But nothing could've prepared him for it. Not really. Despite everything he told himself, letting her go was just as difficult as he thought it would be. He was happy and terrified for

her all at once.

Here they were, his Blazer loaded down with boxes of her stuff, and the moving van trailing them, carrying some furniture. She and Mike had been working it out over the phone, and it was hard to miss the joy in her voice. If she was happy, that was all that mattered, he tried to remind himself. Hell, she was a legal adult. She was having a kid. She could make her own decisions.

He'd spent the last couple weeks helping her pack, making sure she had everything she'd need. He'd made himself crazy over it, trying to be supportive and enthusiastic. But nothing kept him from going over it in his head, lying awake at night, his mind racing with all the possibilities, all the unthinkable *what ifs*. That someone might see her use her powers. That Brenner's goons might show up at her doorstep. But that was ridiculous, he told himself. The lab had shut down years ago, and he hadn't seen hide nor hair of any mysterious government activity in Hawkins. Good fucking riddance.

"You hungry?" Hop asked.

"Always."

He turned off the highway, stopping at a diner.

He ordered two cheeseburgers and some french fries, a milkshake for El. They grabbed a table by the window. El sat across from him, methodically dipping the fries in her milkshake, chewing them slowly. She fiddled with the bracelet around her wrist. The blue one, that once belonged to Sara. Which she still wore, after all these years. His chest constricted, and he swallowed the lump in his throat.

Hopper sighed, pointedly.

"Oh, get over yourself." El snapped, rolling her eyes.

"Just yesterday, we were reading *Anne* and setting up a tripwire, outside the cabin. Jesus, where does the time go?"

"Make it stop . . ." El groaned.

"What? An old man can't reminisce?" Hopper said, leaning back,

gazing at her over his tented fingers. His eyes were overbright.

"That first summer you were allowed outside, I hardly ever saw you. You ran around with those boys every hour of every day. You wanted to be outside. You wanted to be a part of things."

El laughed, softly. Hopper went on.

"Flo's gonna miss you. When I told her you'd be leaving, I swear she teared up a little. She loves you." Hop said. "Don't tell her I told you."

El smiled, touched.

"Joyce is going to miss you the most. She thinks of you as her daughter, you know."

"I know."

Hopper sighed. "All our lives changed, when you came into the picture."

"I still remember that first Christmas, with everyone. I remember cutting down that tree, and stuffing your stocking with a box of Eggsos." Hopper chuckled. "Those were the good old days."

"No." El reached across the table, took his hand in hers. "These are the good old days."

El gazed at him, noting the deep lines around his eyes and his smile, the hints of gray hair at his temples. The stamps time and pain had worn into his face and features. Suddenly, she found it hard to breathe for the lump in her throat.

Hop squeezed her hand, echoing her words.

"These are the good old days."

Hopper pulled the Blazer into the parking lot of the complex, where Mike was waiting for them. The toes of his Chuck Taylor's hung off the edge of the walk as he rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet, hands shoved in his pockets. He'd moved out of the dorms the day before, as was their plan. He rushed to open El's door, pulling her

into a hug the moment she undid her seatbelt. She threw her arms around his neck, pressing a peck to his cheek, grinning broadly. Hopper cleared his throat, and Mike smiled, sheepishly, shaking the older man's hand.

"Chief."

"We talked about this, kid." Hopper said. "I'm your future father-in-law and the grandfather of your child. You can call me Jim."

"Jim." Mike corrected, cheeks flushing.

They began unloading El's belongings.

El paused, in the doorway, shoulders sagging as she glanced at the place, overwhelmed. Because it was all theirs. Because just yesterday they were just stupid kids with stupid plans stupidly in love. Mike caught her hand in his own.

"What do you think?"

El looked at him, eyes shining with tears.

"It's perfect." She breathed. And it was.

A million pictures reeled through her mind's eye, like freeze frames on a roll of film—sunlight filtering through windows; potted plants on the balcony; a toddler, galloping around the kitchen on fat little legs; a Christmas tree lit with fairy lights.

Mike set the box he was carrying on the kitchen table and went to her, pushing her hair back from her face, cupping her cheek in his palm. And he was kissing her, fingers running through her hair. She kissed him back, hands curled against his chest, smiling against his lips. Hopper brushed past them, dropping a box on the floor with a loud *thud*, clearing his throat. El rolled her eyes, breaking the kiss.

Hopper grinned, impishly.

When all the boxes had been brought up to the apartment, Mike suggested they get dinner. Hopper smiled, shaking his head.

"I've gotta get back." He said. "I'll leave you kids to get settled in." El looked at him, reluctant to let him go.

"I'll walk you down."

El walked alongside him, down a flight of stairs and out of the building. Mike trailed. They paused in the parking lot.

"Ellie," Hopper began. She rushed toward him, throwing her arms around his middle. His arms encircled her, held tight.

"I love you." She said, voice trembling. She wanted to say more, wanted to say thank you, for giving her a place to stay, a home, a family. For giving her a second chance.

"I love you too, kid." Hopper said, Tears glittered in his eyes and cut tracks down his face. He sniffed, loudly, breaking the hug.

El wiped a tear from his cheek, begging to cry.

"Don't be stupid." She choked, voice trembling.

"Me? Stupid?" He asked, incredulous. "Never."

She laughed, through her tears. He mussed her hair playfully and hugged her again, pressing a kiss to her forehead. Mike offered his hand. Hopper took it, clapping Mike on the back.

"Be good." He said, climbing into the Blazer. He started the engine, rolled down his window. "Both of you."

El watched the Blazer pull out of the parking lot, down the road, and around the corner, feeling both happy and sad and wondering how that could be.

They ordered take-out Chinese food and settled on the couch, amidst the boxes and random furniture, to watch a movie. The boxes and unpacking could wait, one night.

Her body molded into his, and she felt her eyes growing heavy. His hand rested over her bump, rubbing small, circular patterns over her skin with the pad of his thumb. She let her eyes drift closed,

completely content to just lie there, in his embrace. The boy who'd stood by her, protected her, who'd loved her, since the beginning.

Mike switched the T.V. off as the credits began to roll. He climbed to his feet, bent over, and lifted her in his arms. She slung her arms around his neck. He carried her down the hall and laid her on the bed, which was big and comfy and all theirs.

She grinned at him, wiggling her eyebrows.

"What d'ya think? Should we christen the place?"

Mike smirked. He kissed her, sealing his mouth to hers. His hands slipped under her shirt, tracing the length of her back. He undid her bra.

"My thoughts, exactly."

After, she lay beside him, knotting their hands. Mike rolled on his stomach, gazing into her face.

"El?" He asked, softly.

"Hmm?"

"I love you."

"I love you, too." She said, softly. He leaned over, kissing the tip of her nose, the space between her brows, the corner of her mouth. She sighed, closing her eyes. He was warmth and belonging and everything familiar.

He was her home, in every sense of the phrase.

El and Mike spent the weekend unpacking. She unpacked boxes in the bedrooms while Mike arranged the furniture in the living room. She heard a large *thud*, followed by a string of curses. She found Mike struggling to move the couch. El gave it a nudge with her mind. He turned, frowning at her.

"Don't." He warned. "You shouldn't tire yourself out, El."

"I'm fine." She insisted. She could tell he didn't buy it, but he didn't press her. She wiped at the blood that dripped down her upper lip just as he turned his back, hoping he didn't notice.

She unboxed a lamp and set it on the little stand beside the couch, then hunted for an electrical outlet. In a separate box, she found a bunch of pictures in frames and arranged them on top of the bookcase.

A cheap, fold-up table served as their dining area until they could get something a little more permanent. El found a place in the kitchen for their coffee pot and toaster and assorted pots and pans.

She unpacked her books, filling the shelves, and Mike set his Yoda figurine on the mantelshelf—a running joke, between them. She grinned.

The baby's room was bare, save for one box. She unpacked the stuffed animals and arranged them on the windowsill, side by side. She hugged her arms to her chest, staring at the stark walls and absence of furniture, feeling the space begin to close in on her.

"We'll go shopping." Mike assured her, from the doorway, as if he'd read her thoughts. He crossed the room, wrapping his arms around her from behind, putting his hands on her belly. He pressed kisses along her neck, her shoulder. "We'll get a crib and one of those little spinning mobile things babies always have." He said. "We'll be ready, I promise."

El believed him.

She accompanied Mike to the grocery store, to buy milk and eggs and other necessities. For lunch, they ate PB&J sandwiches.

Mike reached across the table, taking her hand.

"Have you thought about any names, yet?"

El shook her head. With all the chaos and uncertainty, the holidays and the move, a name for their baby had been the farthest from her mind. Apparently, the same couldn't be said for Mike.

"I like Olivia or Amelia." Mike said, thoughtfully.

El nodded. "I like those."

"What about Elise?"

She shook her head. "There was a girl in high school named Elise who always talked shit about me, so . . ." She shrugged. Mike nodded.

"Elise is a no, then." He took a bite of his sandwich. "Maddison?"

"Maybe."

"Iris?"

"No."

"Julia?"

El shrugged.

"What about Alexis? I like that." Then, in true Mike fashion, he said, "we'll call her Alex for short."

"Maybe."

"Brianna?"

"No."

Mike rolled his eyes. "You're impossible, you know that?"

"Hey!" She said. "This is an important choice. As the mother of your child, I have the right to veto."

"Charlotte?"

"Never."

"I give up." Mike said, solemnly.

"Claire?" She suggested.

Mike frowned.

"Veto."

"Olivia is good. I like Alexis, too." She said, hurriedly. "I just think it's a little early."

"Fine." Mike said. "I'm just tired of calling her 'baby girl' all the time."

"What's wrong with that?"

Mike shrugged.

"I'll just call her 'Avocado' from now on." He said.

El laughed.

"Oh, that's better than 'baby girl', huh?"

"Definitely."

El rolled her eyes. She rubbed her stomach. The baby had begun to kick. El could feel the distinct poke of an elbow, a tiny foot. She let out a soft groan.

"She hates being called Avocado." El said, wincing in discomfort. "She's kicking me."

Mike's eyes widened. "Really?"

El nodded, lifting her shirt.

"Right here." She guided Mike's hand to the place where she felt the baby pushing and prodding. Mike laughed.

"Hey, Avocado." He crooned, rubbing his thumb over her skin, where the baby's foot pressed against her uterine wall. In the past few weeks, the baby's movements had transitioned from little flutters to distinct pokes and jabs. Proof that their baby girl was growing. Equal parts magical and irritating.

"She's bigger than an avocado, now. What does your book say?"

Mike got up, digging around in some of the boxes they hadn't yet unpacked, and retrieved the book. He opened it, thumbing through the pages.

"At week twenty-three, your baby is the size of a grapefruit." He read, aloud.

"Grapefruit it is." El joked, tapping her nose.

"What about Jean?" Mike suggested, mouth quirking into a smile. "Like Jean Grey?"

"It's too much like Jane." El said.

"So?" Mike asked. "She'll be named after two absolute badasses."

El frowned.

"That name's never really felt like mine." She said. "It was stolen from me, you know? I don't want to name our child after the person I could've been."

"Okay." Mike conceded, with a sigh. "Jean's a no."

"We have time." El said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "We'll think of something."

El groaned in frustration, chewing on the end of her pen. She sat amidst a pile of papers—job applications for positions as hostess at a fancy, Chinese fusion restaurant, secretary at a pharmacy, off Park street, an associate at Nordstrom—anything offering a part-time gig.

She heard footsteps down the hall, and Mike padded into the room, buttoning his shirt.

"What's wrong?"

"No one's gonna hire me." She said, in despair. "I mean, who in their right mind would hire somebody who's five months pregnant? I mean, I can work for, what, three or four months and then they have to give me paid maternity leave? You'd be stupid to hire me." She

sighed, rubbing her temples.

Mike frowned, fishing an application out of the pile.

"Chuck-E-Cheese's? Really?"

She snatched the paper out of his hands.

"What?" She snapped. "If it helps pay rent, I don't see the issue."

"I'm *teasing*." He said, hastily.

She sighed, burying her face in her hands.

"I know." She groaned. "I'm sorry. I'm just frustrated. I don't like being helpless."

"Helpless? You?" Mike asked. "Says the girl who can literally kill people with a glance. I think there's a chance you're being dramatic."

"Shit all over that, Wheeler. You know what I mean."

Mike touched her shoulder.

"Give it a chance, El." He said. "And if nobody hires you, fine. You should rest, save your strength. Don't stress yourself out over this."

She glared at him.

"If you think I'm gonna sit here on my butt and watch you suffer through two back-to-back classes and then an eight-hour shift at RadioShack, you're delusional. That's not how it works, Mike." She got to her feet, pressing her hands against his cheeks, forcing his eyes to meet hers. "We're a team. I'm not gonna let you do all the work."

"Oh, like growing an actual human being inside you isn't work?" Mike rolled his eyes. He wrapped his arms around her, resting his chin against her temple.

"Not when my boyfriend, er, *fiancé*," she corrected, "kisses the ground I walk on and feeds me pudding and rubs cocoa butter on my stretchmarks and looks at me like I'm the most beautiful thing he's

ever seen even though I'm gassy and bloated and I haven't brushed my hair in three days."

"Mmm, he sounds like a dream come true." Mike mumbled, against her hair.

"He is."

She fiddled with the buttons on his shirt. She lifted her head, reaching up to caress his face. Her thumb grazed the deep purple stains under his eyes, from lack of sleep. Her eyes searched his face, noting the deep creases between his brows, the way his shoulders seemed to be a few inches higher, the way his body was all points and jagged edges—tense and unyielding. Her brows knit with sudden concern for him.

"Are you getting enough sleep?" She asked, softly.

"Yes." He said.

"Promise?"

"Yes, I'm fine." He pressed a soft kiss to the corner of her mouth. "Don't worry about me."

"Too late." She said. She ran a hand through his hair, resting their foreheads together. "Call your boss. Stay with me, today. We can take a nap."

Mike laughed. "Oh, yeah, and get myself fired while I'm at it?"

"They'd be crazy to fire you."

"And totally justified, if I keep playing hookie."

"Fine." She conceded, rolling her eyes. "I'll just stay here and make you jealous with all the napping I'll be doing." She flopped onto the sofa. Mike smiled. She patted the cushion, beside her, wiggling her eyebrows.

"C'mon. I know you want it."

"Are you trying to seduce me?"

"Maybe?"

"It's working." He went to the couch and lay down, beside her. She wrapped her arms around his waist, making him the little spoon and effectively trapping him.

"Ten minutes." He mumbled, closing his eyes. El pressed her face into his shirt, suppressing a laugh.

Mike had class, and El stayed home, lying on the sofa. She propped her feet up, on a cushion, wearing nothing but sweatpants and a bra, telekinetically switching the channels. baby had been kicking like crazy all day and her lower-back ached. In addition, she hadn't really been feeling like herself today, uncomfortable and exhausted, so she'd given up all plans for doing anything productive and lay down. One of the channels was airing a *General Hospital* rerun, one of her favorite episodes. She settled down to watch, reaching across the sofa to grab the nearest pillow in reach. Her attention remained divided, however, as the baby somersaulted in her womb.

"What're you up to in there?" El asked, rubbing a hand up and down her stomach in a futile attempt to calm her little energizer bunny. She stared in wonder as a foot poked against her skin, visible from the outside. She tickled it with her fingers, letting out a sigh as the baby stretched and tumbled around. As much as she adored feeling their little grapefruit move around, it could be uncomfortable at times.

"How 'bout a trip to the kitchen, huh?" She asked. She hunted around in the cabinets for a snack and settled on a bag of potato chips. She shut off the T.V. with a flick of her head and ventured down the hall on stocking feet. She went into the baby's room, where they had stashed the boxes that had yet to be unpacked. She knelt on the floor, opening the box that contained a bunch of kids' books and puzzles Hop had given her, when she was younger and still in hiding. They had been stashed in the darkest reaches of her closet, and she'd kept them for their daughter, when she was old enough to read and solve word puzzles. El dug around until she found Sara's old copy of *Anne of the Green Gables* and returned to the sofa. She opened it, running

her fingers over the binding—the book had begun to fall apart, after the many, many years of usage. The pages were crinkled and dog-eared, the cover was coated in a layer of dust.

El began to read aloud, and the baby's kicking and movements calmed, somewhat, at the lullaby of her mother's voice. El continued to read, allowing herself a few hours inside the story—one of her favorites. Hopper said it was one of the things she and Sara had in common: they both loved this book. This book, about an orphan girl sent by mistake. A girl with an imagination, who broke rules and pushed boundaries.

El read until afternoon bled into evening and darkness fell. A series of thudding footsteps and the jingle of keys interrupted her, and Mike walked in. He smiled, leaning over to kiss her lips, gently and sweetly.

"Hey." He said. "Whatcha doing?"

"Reading."

He dropped onto the sofa, beside her, leaning his forehead against her temple.

"Reading?"

"I was reading *Anne* to the baby. I thought she might like it."

"How is she?" He asked.

"Good. She was kicking like crazy. I just got her to settle down."

Mike smiled, putting his hands on her belly. El flinched, making a face.

"Cold." She remarked.

"Sorry." Mike cupped his hands over his mouth and breathed on them, warming them up. El shifted, sitting up. Mike stroked his fingers up and down her skin, tracing the dark line that began at her belly button and ran the length of her navel.

"Hey, little girl." Mike said. His breath tickled her skin. "How're you doing?" He kissed her belly. "I missed you, today."

Just then, the baby began to stir. A foot pushed up against El's uterine wall as their little girl stretched. El groaned.

"Dammnit, Mike." El snapped. "You woke her up. She's gonna be kicking me all night."

"Sorry."

El rolled her eyes. Mike pressed the pad of his finger against the place where their little girl poked.

"She's gonna be a gymnast." El said.

"Or a soccer player."

"A dancer, maybe."

Mike continued to press kisses to her belly, lips slowly traveling until he was kissing her neck and *god*, she was sensitive there. She giggled and squirmed under his attentions. His mouth found hers and she caught his bottom lip in her teeth, teasing him. He leaned forward, asking for more, and she pulled away, withholding the very thing he desired. A noise erupted in the back of his throat, something halfway between a sigh and a groan of frustration, and it made her shiver. There was fire in his eyes, something hidden in the depths of him. Something she liked. She liked it when he looked at her like that, like she was the one thing in the world he wanted. She liked it when he looked at her with love in the eyes.

She gave in, and they were kissing, slowly and deeply, again and again and again. Mike pulled away, taking her face in his hands, and pressed a kiss to her forehead. He eased off the couch.

El, flushed and breathless, watched him retrieve the radio they kept on a shelf by the sink. He brought it into the living room and set it on the coffee table, fiddling with the dials. He smiled, eyes searching her face, as Van Morrison's voice floated out of the radio. He stood.

"May I have this dance?" He asked, offering his hand.

She nodded, taking it, and got to her feet. She wrapped her arms around his neck. He put his hand on her hip, on the small of her back, holding her close. They swayed, listening as Van Morrison sang, *"hark now hear the sailor's cry. Smell the sea and feel the sky. Let your soul and spirit fly into the mystic . . ."*

He lifted her arms above her head, spinning her in a slow circle, and she laughed, leaning her forehead against his own. His hands moved so they were resting on her belly. They swayed and swayed, noses brushing, breathing the same air. El lost herself along the way, in Van Morrison's voice and the thrumming of the bass, wrapped in static; in Mike's hands resting on her hips, holding her close; in his presence, strong and steady and constant and all hers.

*"And I wanna rock your gypsy soul
Just like way back in the days of old
And together we will float
Into the mystic
Come on, girl . . ."*

11. Chapter 11

El dreamt of the void.

Again.

Her pregnancy had inspired countless dreams—Simmons said this was normal, that all her subconscious fears and anxieties came to the surface as she slept, a common side-effect of pregnancy for any mother-to-be. Combined with El's traumatic past and tendency toward nightmares, it was no surprise that El dreamt almost every night.

Some were terrifying, filled with blood and violence and hands that choked her, and a baby's cry, in the night. A recurring nightmare led her a one-room shack in the middle of a dark wood, where she'd sit in wait, amongst the foliage, watching the darkened windows until a light from a single bulb flicked on. She'd enter, hearing the floorboards creak beneath her feet and the scent of mildew and sawdust and something rotting. The inside of the shack was bare except for that single light bulb and a wooden crib. El would approach the crib, finding herself terrified to look inside. Knowing if she did, what she saw would make her blood run cold. But she looked anyway, drawn to the crib as if by a magnet, feeling like one feels when passing a car accident on the highway. At first, there was just a blanket, but something told her there is something else lying beneath the blanket. She steeled herself, lifting the corner of the blanket and peeking inside. The thing beneath the blanket changed as often as the dream occurred. Sometimes it was Mike—unseeing, glazed eyes staring up at her, blood running from the corner of his mouth a dripping onto the white cloth, staining it crimson. Sometimes it was Hopper, a bullet hole making a third eye in his forehead, oozing thick, black, congealed blood. Sometimes it was Joyce, corners of her face pulled tight in the final expression that crossed her face before she died—terror. Sometimes it was her Mama, or Dustin or Lucas or Will or Max. Sometimes it was Papa, or Kali, or her Aunt Becky. And sometimes it was this horrible, bloody, mangled thing, so small it could only be her baby, except that it wasn't human.

Sometimes the dreams led her through dark tunnels and mazes that

went on forever. She never found the end of those tunnels, and the dreams were more frustrating than terrifying, though they teased up a nauseous kind of panic that tugged at the roots of her stomach when she knew the dream has been going on too long and still, she couldn't find an exit.

Sometimes they were just strange. El dreamt she tap-danced naked in front of thousands of people. In another dream, she befriended a talking giraffe, and they painted her bedroom walls bright, neon orange. On one occasion, she dreamt she gave birth to a cat.

Sometimes the dreams were good. She walked through a thick snowfall, feeling nothing but peace and contentment. She sat on the porch of the cabin, feeling sunlight on her skin—a reminder of that first summer, in 1985. And the smell of cigarette smoke and pine lingered in her nostrils when she woke. Sometimes she dreamt of Mike, of his voice and his smell and their hands entwined.

Tonight, the dreams were different. When she dreamt of void, she couldn't shake the feeling that she wasn't really dreaming, at all. That whatever she was seeing and hearing in all that blackness was all happening for real. Her mind slipped into this third space all on its own, and she was helpless to do anything but wait it out until it showed her what she needed to see. There were things lurking here, things of the Demogorgon variety. But they couldn't see her and she wanted it to stay that way. Sometimes she saw Kali in the void. Her sister, who was god knows where doing god knows what, but El could sometimes catch glimpses of her. El didn't know if Kali could see her, but the mirage never lingered long enough for her to find out. The image of her sister would fade into a puff of supernatural smoke, leaving El alone in the dark.

Tonight, El was alone in the void. Or, at least, she thought she was. She turned her head, trying to catch the echoes and whispers that passed like fleeting shadows through the air. The water around her feet remained undisturbed. El took a step, then another. Something disturbed the water, a few yards to her left. She squinted, trying to make it out in the darkness.

"Hello?" She asked, hearing her voice rebound back to her, a thousand times repeated. The echo was jarring against the silence.

She received no answer, although something was moving just beyond her scope of vision. She walked towards it, taking careful, measured steps, until she could literally smell the thing. Rotting flesh. Wet mildew. Death.

El froze.

The thing she was hunting, or the thing that was hunting her, crept out of the darkness. El saw the glint of its slimy, reptilian skin pulled tight over muscle and bone. She saw its flower-petal maw unfurl, slightly, as it scented the air. It was the stuff of nightmares, all the horrible visions that had assaulted her in the aftermath of her showdown with the Demogorgon in that science classroom, and again as they descended into the rift and the Mind Flayer's minions attacked from all sides. Another monster. Another evil.

It turned its head, looking straight at her, and a low growl erupted from its throat. It knew she was here. It could smell her.

El froze, heart in her throat, listening to the click of its jagged teeth. She could see ribbons of skin and flesh—bits of something it had just eaten, perhaps—hanging like ragged tissue paper from its jaws. Its muscles coiled, and it lunged for her.

El screamed, throwing her arms out to protect herself, but she was too slow. Its claws raked across her abdomen, setting a dull, throbbing ache through her core.

A hand closed around her wrist, and it took her half a second to realize the monster and the void and the blackness had faded. She sat up, a scream dying in her throat. The grip on her wrist was rough and tight, and she tried to wrench her hand away, still half in the dream, fending off imaginary blows.

"El." Someone said, though they sounded distant and washed-out, like they were speaking through T.V. static.

"Stop." She moaned. "No."

"El, it's okay." The voice was clearer, now. She recognized it. It belonged to Mike.

She stopped fighting, eyes flying open. He'd switched their bedside lamp on, and the light illuminated their bedroom. She drew a lungful of air, tears running down her face.

"Mike." She sobbed, reaching for him. His arms encircled her.

"It's okay, you're safe." He soothed. "You're safe, El."

She choked back tears, nodding, huddling against him. Something warm and wet dripped from her nose and onto her upper lip. She wiped at it, and the back of her hand came away streaked with blood.

"It's okay." He repeated, against her hair, tracing patterns over her knuckles. She squeezed his hand so tightly her knuckles turned white. Just then, another dull, pulsing pain grew in her abdomen and lower-back. She moaned, tears springing in her eyes.

"Something's wrong." She said, and the words felt like glass in her mouth. She pressed a hand over her bump, face screwed up against the pain. It faded, leaving her sweaty and shaking and hollow.

"What?" Mike asked. He looked at her, pushing her hair back from her face. "El, you were dreaming, it's not real."

"No." She shook her head. "It's the baby, something's wrong." She gritted her teeth as another wave of pain washed over her. Like menstrual cramps, but a thousand times worse. "It hurts." She moaned.

"What?" Mike yelled, grabbing her hand. "Where does it hurt? El . . ." There was a note of panic in his voice. "El, talk to me."

"I'm having contractions." She gasped, through her tears. She couldn't stop the shaking in her hands.

"No, that can't be right, that's . . ." He shook his head, color draining from his face. "It's too early."

El swung her legs out of bed, made for the bathroom. Another contraction began, and she paused, leaning against the doorframe. She squeezed her eyes shut, waiting it out.

"Did your water break?" Mike asked. "I mean, is there . . . anything, are you . . . are you bleeding?" He got out, looking at her with pained, frightened eyes.

El shook her head.

"No." She said, shakily. "I don't think so."

"El, look at me." Mike pleaded, taking her hand. She pulled her hand out of his grip. She looked at him, face shining with sweat and tears. Mike's frown deepened. He reached up, wiping at the blood still streaming from her nose.

"Your nose is bleeding." He said, softly. He reached for her hand again, and his time she didn't pull away.

"If you're having contractions, we need to go the hospital." Mike said, trying to keep his voice steady. "We need to go."

"No." El shook her head. "I'm not ready." She sobbed. "I'm not ready to have a baby."

"Dammnit El, listen to me." Mike said, taking her face in her hands. "We need to go the hospital. I need you to work with me, alright? It's too early for you to be going into labor, which means something is wrong. At the hospital, there are doctors who can help you." He said. "I know you only want what's best for the baby, and I think the best thing you can do right now is go to the hospital, okay?"

She choked back a sob.

"Okay."

"I'll call the hospital."

Mike reached for the phone, all the while looking at her like he expected her to burst into flames or drop dead, right there. His face was chalky white, and his fingers shook so bad he had trouble dialing the number. Someone picked up, on the third ring, but El lost track of the exchange as she prepared herself for another contraction, pain shooting through her lower back. She tried to measure out her breaths, like Hop taught her to do, so many years ago.

In.

One. Two. Three.

Out.

She closed her eyes.

Mike hung up.

"Okay, let's go." He said. He grabbed a jacket from the closet and draped it around her shoulders, then helped her down the hall and out the door. She climbed into the passenger seat, and he started the engine, pulling out of the parking space. She didn't bother with the seat belt. Blood rushed in her ears. She held onto her belly, tears and snot dripping down her throat, trying to stamp down the panic that coiled like a tentacled beast around her lungs.

The drive to the hospital was the longest ten minutes of Mike's life. He ran a yellow light, gripping the steering wheel for dear life, trying to stop the trembling in his hands. He came to screeching halt at another red light, swearing under his breath. El reached over, fingers wrapping around his inner elbow.

"It's gonna be fine." She said, eyes glistening with tears. "It's gonna be okay. Right?"

"Right." He said, and the word felt like wet cardboard in his mouth. El's grip tightened, and her face contorted as she endured another contraction. He watched her grit her teeth, watched her whole body tense, forehead shining with sweat, and realized she was the strongest person he knew.

"Hold on, El." He told her, grabbing her hand and holding fast. "Just hold on a little longer, alright? We're almost there."

He parked in the emergency lane, outside the steps, and rushed to the passenger side to help El out of her seat. He pushed open the double doors, heart in his throat. He pushed past a crowd of people, El in tow, and reached the front desk. He drummed his knuckles on the wooden surface.

"Hi, um, my name's Mike Wheeler. I called, um, about ten minutes ago . . . um, my fiancé is pregnant, and she's having contractions. She's only twenty-three weeks along, so we're really worried something's wrong."

The words tumbled out of his mouth in a rush.

"How far apart are the contractions?"

Mike shook his head, looking at her.

"Um, a few minutes, I think. I don't know . . ."

The woman nodded. She picked up the phone and dialed a number, saying something into the receiver. A moment later, two nurses in scrubs came into the waiting room with a wheelchair. They helped El sit down, and then they were rushing her through the double doors and down a hallway. Mike hurried after them. El turned her head, brown eyes locked on his face, torn between terror and relief. And then one of the nurses blocked his view. He watched them wheel her into an exam room, and the door swung shut.

Mike jiggled the knob, finding it locked. He banged on the door with his fists, panicked. A nurse approached him, putting a hand on his arm.

"Mr. Wheeler, it's probably best if you wait in the waiting room. We will notify you of any change in her condition."

"I need to see her." Mike snapped. After everything, to say he struggled with separation anxiety was a bit of an understatement.

"You will." The nurse assured him. "Right now, you need to give her space, for her privacy and safety."

"No, please. Please just let me be in there with her. She needs me . . ."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Wheeler, I can't allow that."

"Can you at least tell me what's going on?"

"I'm afraid I can't, Mr. Wheeler. I don't have enough information. I

will, however, let you know when I do." She paused. "It's possible she's in preterm labor."

"Preterm labor?"

"She's risk of giving birth prematurely. At twenty-three weeks, it is almost impossible for babies to survive outside the womb. There are ways to stop the labor progression, however, to ensure the baby isn't born at such an early stage in gestation. I assure you, Mr. Wheeler, we are doing everything we can."

Mike nodded, tears welling in his eyes. He allowed the nurse to lead him back down the hallway and into the waiting room, where he took a seat in the corner and buried his face in his hands, shaking with horrible sobs that wracked his whole body. He didn't consider himself particularly religious, but all he could do was ask *why why why*, and the universe didn't have an answer for him. The terror was nothing like he'd ever felt in his life. El and the baby—they were his family, his whole world. He didn't understand how this could've happened. Just yesterday, they were feeling their little girl kick and shopping for a changing table. And now everything was coming apart at the seams and that black, gaping maw opened under his feet, threatening to swallow him whole.

He'd failed her. He said he'd be there for her, and he so easily let her slip through his fingers. And they wouldn't even let him see her . . .

Eventually, he pulled himself together enough to drag his ass out of the chair to find a payphone, where he called Hopper and told him what was going on. The Chief, a rising note of desperation and panic in his voice, assured Mike he'd be there in a little under an hour. Mike called his mother, too. The sound of her distress over the phone only made it worse. He hung up and went to the front desk, asking to see El. No luck. He sat down, fingers tapping an irregular beat on the chair.

He'd heard people describe time moving slowly, but nothing could've prepared him for this wretched, sluggish crawl. He lost track of everything, and each moment seemed to take him backward in time, not forward. The clock on the wall in the waiting room was four minutes off, though by his watch it was 3:15 a.m.

After an eternity, the clerk at the front desk called his name. His breath snagged in his throat. A nurse awaited him in the doorway, leading down the hall. She looked at him over the top of her glasses.

"Miss Hopper is allowed to have visitors, now." She told him.

"Is . . . is she . . . " He couldn't get the words out.

"She's fine." The nurse said, leading him down a hallway, through another pair of doors, and down another, long corridor. "She was in the early stages of preterm labor. Other than the contractions, she's showing no other signs of progression. No dilation, no loss of fluid or any irregular discharge. There's no sign of effacement, which means the cervix hasn't begun to thin and the baby hasn't begun to descend toward the birth canal, all very reassuring. We've given her medication, and the contractions have stopped. She's resting, now." The nurse informed him. A wave of relief washed over Mike. "We would like to keep her another night, and then she can go home. We think it's best she remains on bed rest for the next few weeks, until we can be sure she is not at risk for a premature birth. She will be able to move around the house for short periods of time and lift no more than five pounds."

The nurse paused outside a room marked 318 and opened the door. El lay in bed, hair fanned out around her face, eyes closed. He rushed to her bedside, and her eyelids fluttered. She smiled, eyes widening, as she caught sight of his face.

"Mike." She said, reaching for him. He knelt next to her bed, tears streaming down his face. He cupped her cheek, searching her face. He noted the dark circles under her eyes, the pallor of her skin. The exhaustion written there.

"Hey, El." He said, shakily, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "How're you doing?"

"I'm fine." She said. "The contractions stopped. They've got me on a bunch of medications." She made a face.

"I know." He said, pushing her hair back from her forehead.

"How do you feel?"

"Exhausted." She said. "But also kind of . . . caffeinated, at the same time, if that makes sense."

"Caffeinated?"

"The meds make me all jittery, look . . ." She held out her hands, palms down, watching them tremble. He reached out, enfolding them in his own. He leaned over and kissed her, again and again, until he coaxed a smile out of her.

"They wouldn't let me see you." He said.

"I know." El said. "I asked for you. They wouldn't listen to me." She shook her head, frowning. "Nobody takes me seriously, around here."

"We'll be out of here, soon." He soothed.

El nodded. "If the contractions don't start up again, I'll be out of here by tomorrow."

"I heard they want you on bedrest."

"Yes, they told me I need to go on bedrest for four weeks." She said. She rubbed her belly. "You better hang in there, little bean." She chided. "We're not ready for you quite yet." She looked at him, then, the corners of her face drawn tight. Her frown deepened.

"Mike, there's something I need to tell you." El said. She glanced over her shoulder, nervously, as if someone might overhear, but they were alone in the room.

"I had a nightmare, before the contractions started." She said. "I saw a monster. Like the Demogorgon, but different. I don't really remember exactly what it looked like . . ." She trailed off, picking at a loose thread in the blanket draped over her legs. "It saw me, too." She paused, drawing a shaky breath. "It knew I was there."

"It was just a dream, El." He said.

"I don't think so." Her lip trembled, eyes shining with tears. "It felt

real."

Heavy weight settled in Mike's gut. He put an arm around her, rubbing her back, thinking about those things that lurked in the shadows. It was all real. He'd seen it. He'd seen the things that lived in an echo of their world, the things that lived in her mind. His best friend had traveled to another dimension and back and lived to tell the tale. He'd fought interdimensional monsters. He'd seen enough weird shit to know that whatever this thing was, it was probably very real and stalking those deep, dark tunnels beneath their feet. He'd seen enough to know that he was powerless to stop whatever evils lurked in the darkness. He's seen enough to know that nothing was ever as it seemed.

"The gate's closed. Nothing can get through." Mike said, more to himself than her. El wasn't listening. She grabbed his sleeve, looking at him with so much anguish and terror in her eyes it made his heart crawl into his throat, tears springing in his eyes.

"It was trying to hurt the baby." She said, choking back a sob. Mike went cold.

"What if . . . what if she's j-just like m-me?" El sobbed, clapping a hand over her mouth. Mike shook his head, eyes welling with tears.

"El, listen to me." He said. "I know you're scared. I'm scared. And I can't imagine what you're going through . . ." He shook his head. "But I need you to try and relax, okay? The stress is bad for the baby." He pried her hands away from her face.

"If she's like you, then that's the best goddamn gift you could give her. I hope she's like you, you wanna know why?" Mike asked. "Because that means she'll understand people. And I mean, *really* understand them. And she'll be smart and stubborn. God, so stubborn. She won't take shit from anybody. Because she'll be just like her mom."

He looked at her.

"You're the best thing that ever happened to me." He leaned forward, kissing the tip of her nose. El shook her head, furiously.

"You know what I mean." She said, in despair. "What if she's born with abilities? What if she can see things like I can?"

"If she's like you, she'll be able to protect herself. And she won't be raised by bastards in a lab, she'll be raised by people who love her. She can use that gift to do beautiful things." Mike said, tears spilling over his lashes.

"Remember that time you made us fly?" He asked. "After school, we were standing underneath that big oak tree. And we were kissing and you said, 'watch this' and you started floating off the ground. You grabbed my hand and took me with you, do you remember that?"

El nodded. Mike shook his head.

"After I got over the fact that I was floating, I remember thinking, *holy shit, my girlfriend's a goddamn superhero.*" He smiled, lost in the memory, remembering the way it felt as his feet left the ground.

El smiled.

"Remember when you broke Troy's arm?" He asked, with a laugh. "And made him piss himself in front of the whole school?"

"No, actually, I don't." El deadpanned, rolling her eyes.

He reeled off a whole list of crap she'd done, like, *remember when you flipped a van? or remember when Dustin asked you to phone in for aliens?*

"Point is, if she's anything like her mother, she'll be a goddamn badass." Mike squeezed her hand. "You don't have anything to worry about."

"What if the bad men find her?" El asked, using 'bad men' to describe Brenner's goons, and old habit that hadn't faded after all this time. "What if they take her away?"

"That's not gonna happen, El. No one's going to take her away."

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do." Mike said. "Nothing's gonna hurt her as long as I'm

standing. Okay? I'm not going to let anything happen to my family." He kissed her, then. Soft and sweet. "I need you to trust me on this one."

El sighed. She gazed at him, pressing her palms against his cheeks. She kissed him, fisting her fingers in his hair. When she pulled away, her eyes were lit with a kind of fire. She traced his bottom lip with her thumb.

"I trust you."

El was sitting in bed, eating ice chips out of a little plastic cup, when she heard commotion outside her room and Hopper burst through the door, looking disheveled and a bit panicked, bellowing at the nurse. His face lost all its sharp edges, however, as he caught sight of her. He went to her bedside, wrapping her in a hug.

"Hey, Ellie." He said, softly, stroking her hair. She smiled, inhaling the scent of him—cigarette smoke and liquor and pine.

"Hi, Dad." She said.

He took a seat in the visitor's chair, which was empty of its former occupant (a certain, freckle-faced dork who'd gone to get her something to eat from the cafeteria) at the moment. He took her hand.

"How're you feeling?"

"I'm okay." She assured him, gently. "Just tired, that's all."

"Mike called . . . I came as fast as I could." He said. "I'm glad you're okay."

El nodded. "They said I went into preterm labor, but I didn't dilate or have any other progression besides minor contractions." She told him. Though, she thought, they certainly didn't *feel* like minor contractions. "They want me on bedrest to play it safe."

"For how long?"

"Four weeks."

Hop sighed, sympathetically.

"Better safe than sorry."

"Yeah, I guess." El said, with a sigh. "I don't know how I'm gonna make it through four weeks of this crap. I've only been here for three hours and I'm already bored. They don't want me moving at all for a whole day. So, I'm stuck here." She fiddled with the IV in her arm, agitated.

"How's Mike holding up?"

"Mike's been great, though. He feeds me ice chips and brings me magazines from the waiting room. He just went to get something to eat. He'll be back."

"Try to rest." Hop told her, gently. "Get some sleep, if you can."

"I can't sleep." She said, with a sigh. "I just wanna go home."

"Patience, grasshopper." Hop said, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

"I know, I know." She sighed, again. She was doing a lot of sighing, lately. She rubbed a hand over her belly, absently, and picked up the magazine lying on her bedside table. She opened it, riffling through the pages, and set it down again. Just then, Mike walked in, carrying a plastic tray.

He greeted Hop.

"Sorry for the scare." Mike said. Hop waved a hand.

"I'm just glad that's all it was. A scare." Hop remarked. Mike nodded. He looked at El.

"Think you can keep down some real food?" Mike asked.

El nodded, eagerly. She'd been battling waves of nausea that came and went, but her appetite had returned with fervor in the last half hour or so. Mike could tell she was feeling better. Her cheeks had

regained some color and her eyes looked considerably brighter.

"Slim pickings, but I grabbed what I could." Mike said. He handed her the tray, and she balanced it on her lap. The plate contained Jell-O, carrots, and potato soup. She unwrapped the utensils, packaged in plastic, and stabbed the cooked, lukewarm carrots with her fork.

"Gross." She said, with a groan. "Did they happen to have any cheeseburgers in the cafeteria?"

"Unfortunately, no." He said.

"Pizza?"

"No."

"Breakfast burritos?"

"I don't think so."

El made a face.

"C'mon, just try it." Mike said. "The Jell-O is good. I had some. It's cherry flavored."

El sighed. She ate a spoonful, then another, grumbling between swallows.

"I called my mom and let her know everything is fine. I told her you'll be out of the hospital by tomorrow afternoon." Mike said. "She told me to tell you she's glad everything's alright and she hopes you're feeling okay."

El nodded.

Mike stifled a yawn.

"Kid, if you wanna go home and get some rest, I can keep an eye on her for a bit." Hop offered. "You look like you've been through hell and back."

Mike cocked an eyebrow, looking at El, looking like a nap didn't

sound like a bad idea. She nodded.

"He's right, Mike. You look like you just got run over by a herd of demodogs."

"Thanks?"

He was wearing the shirt he'd slept in, and his hair was a wild mess of tangled curls. The dark bags under his eyes looked like bruises.

"Get some rest, Mike." She said, reaching over to squeeze his hand. He returned the pressure, stopping to press a kiss on her knuckles. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Promise?"

El smiled.

"I promise."

Mike drove home, numb from the chaos of the last four hours or so. When he finally stumbled through the door, he made a beeline for the shower. He stripped off his clothes and stepped under the stream of water, not bothered by the fact that it was icy-cold. He let it run over him, washing the sweat and sickness and hospital out of his pores. After, he changed into a clean t-shirt and collapsed onto the bed, asleep before his head hit the pillow. When he woke, his watch read 2:32 p.m. He dragged himself out of bed and went into the kitchen to make himself a cup of coffee, feeling sluggish and even more tired than he was before, if that was possible.

He set about packing an overnight bag for himself and El. He packed an extra set of clothes and a toothbrush, for her. After a moment's debate, he included *Anne of The Green Gables* in his bag, as well, knowing she'd appreciate the distraction. He paused in the bathroom to run a comb through his hair, then grabbed his keys and made for the hospital, once again. On the way, he stopped by the convenience store on the corner and bought a king-size Snicker's bar.

He found El sitting up, solving a crossword puzzle in one of those magazines. Hop was snoring, softly, in the chair by the window.

"What's a seven-letter word for a bright, pinkish-purple color?" She asked, without looking up. Mike considered it, a moment.

"Fuchsia?" He suggested.

She stuck her tongue between her teeth, filling in the blank, then grinned.

"Thanks."

"I brought you a present." He said. She glanced up. He held out the Snicker's bar. She gasped, snatching it out of his hands.

"God, I love you." She said, unwrapping it.

"I know." Mike returned, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. She took a bite and hummed, appreciatively.

"I brought you *Anne*, too. I thought you might like something else to do besides sit and stare at walls." He said, holding up the book.

El brandished her magazine.

"Crosswords." She said, around her a mouthful of Snicker's bar.

"Yeah, well, when you solve those . . ." Mike said, setting it on the bedside table. She picked up the book, turning it over in her hands.

"Thanks."

"How're you feeling?" He asked, dropping into the chair by her bedside.

"Fine. I felt the baby kick about fifteen minutes ago. It was the first time I've felt her since all the excitement, so that's relieving." She looked at him. "Did you have a good nap?"

"Yes." He touched her cheek. "You should rest, El. You look exhausted."

"I can't." She said. "The meds they gave me make me feel like I just drank fifteen cans of Red Bull. Even if I could fall asleep, a nurse

comes in here every twenty minutes and starts asking me questions and checks the monitors." She said, gesturing to the screen that recorded the hills and valleys of two separate heartbeats—hers and the baby's.

El glanced at Hopper, asleep in a chair on the other side of the room. "It's a wonder he can sleep through all the commotion, although I shouldn't really be surprised. I mean, I did manage to sneak out my window like twice a week in high school."

"Ten bucks he's pretending to be asleep and he heard everything you just said."

"That wouldn't surprise me, either." El said, with a sigh. "He hears what he wants to hear. He'll sleep through Dustin exploding hot dogs in the microwave at two a.m. but if he has a shadow of a doubt something supernatural is going on, he's staked out on the front porch, revolver in hand." She rolled her eyes. "Ever the paranoid."

"Understandable, considering . . ." He didn't finish the sentence, didn't need to. El's eyes darkened. She nodded, and the conversation exhausted itself like a balloon deflating. She reached across the bed and picked up *Anne* from the bedside table.

"Read to me?" Mike asked.

El smiled, nodding. She turned to the page she'd dog-eared and began to read. Mike leaned back in his chair, tapping his toe to the beat of one of the monitors, as it beeped in time with El's heart, listening to her read and feeling, for the first time in the last twelve hours, at ease.

12. Chapter 12

They released El from the hospital around noon. She hadn't experienced any more contractions. Her doctor performed a couple more exams, then gave her the green light to go home. Mike drove, and Hopper followed them back to the apartment to help get her settled in before he had to head back to Hawkins.

They took the elevator to their floor, and Mike offered to help her down the hall, but she brushed him off. Mike busied himself building her a little nest of sorts with extra pillows and blankets on their bed, trying to make it as comfortable as possible for her since she'd be confined to it for the next few weeks (with some exceptions). He stocked her bedside table with books, magazines, and more crossword puzzles, to keep her occupied. He'd also dragged their T.V. into her bedroom.

Once she'd settled into bed, he and Hopper gazed at her, looking so small amongst all those pillows. Her face was full of sharp edges, eyes like obsidian. She was trying her best to keep her walls up, to not let anything through the cracks, but Mike knew her better than anyone. She wasn't happy.

"Bye, kiddo." Hopper ruffling her curls and bent down to kiss her forehead, making her promise to keep in touch. He left, leaving them alone.

"I'll make you lunch?" Mike offered. He went into the kitchen, rummaging around in the refrigerator for sandwich commodities. When he returned, he found her fast asleep and snoring, softly. He smiled, a bit relieved, since he knew she hadn't slept in almost thirty-six hours and she was wiped out—physically and emotionally drained. He turned off the lamp, leaning down to kiss her forehead. She stirred but didn't wake.

El stuck her tongue between her teeth, carefully gluing down the edges of a photo—one of her and Hop, standing with their arms around each other in the Byers' kitchen—in a book which lay open on her lap. It was thick and full of blank pages. Heaps of photos were

scattered around her, on the bed. She sat up, reaching across the bed to grab the nearest pillow and stuff it between her back and the headboard to support her aching back. She heaved a sigh, blowing a lock of hair out of her face.

In the two weeks since she'd been confined to bedrest, she'd taken up scrapbooking. That, and just about every other activity that didn't require a lot of movement. She worked on perfecting her knitting, the booklet Flo gave her open on the bed. She kept a journal, filling it with scattered thoughts and little doodles. She ran up the phone bill chatting with Max and Nancy and the boys (all in separate states, with Lucas and Max in California and Will and Nancy in New York and Dustin in Michigan). She filled them in on the excitement, on her current condition and made plans to see them again, over spring break. That was, if she wasn't still laid up.

She binged soap operas. When she wasn't quoting episodes of *All My Children* word for word, she watched movies. Mike raided Blockbuster down the street, and she filled her days watching big-budget sci-fi films and bad rom-coms and nature documentaries. She wrote letters to the baby, thinking it would be fun to let her read them when she was old enough. El told the baby what it was like to carry her and feel her move and witness all her body's changes as she grew. She told the baby how excited she was to finally meet her, all the plans she had, everything she'd show her. She wrote about Mike, about the freckle-faced dork who'd saved her (in more ways than one), and how he was the kindest, bravest person she knew. She wrote about Grandpa Hop, all the sacrifices he'd made, how he'd given her a home. She dated and signed each one of these letters, tucking them away in between the pages of *Anne of the Green Gables* for safekeeping.

She enjoyed scrapbooking the most. She'd taken up the hobby after Mike asked her what she wanted to do with all the old photos they had tucked away in a shoebox on a shelf in the closet, gathering dust. She started a scrapbook, quickly exhausting their collection of photos. Jonathan, at her request, mailed her a thick envelope containing hundreds of others, and she spent hours arranging them in chronological order and gluing them into her book.

She picked up another photo, a candid shot of Mike and Dustin

poring DM guide, in deep conversation. Her hand slipped, and the edge of the photo sliced into her thumb. She cursed, cradling her thumb. She brought it to her lips and sucked on it, setting the book aside and getting to her feet. She went into the bathroom, rummaging around in the cabinets. She retrieved a band-aid and returned to the bed, tearing open the wrapper. Paper cut remedied, she returned her attention to the scrapbook, but just as soon set it aside, suddenly uninterested. She flopped against her pillows, staring at the ceiling.

Darkness was falling. She watched the shadows drift across the walls. She was *restless*. A good word. A word to describe all that jittery, pent-up energy. The boredom, the frustration knowing at her insides. She hated this. She hated not being able to take more than few steps to the bathroom or to the kitchen to get a glass of water. She hated feeling like she wasn't self-sufficient, like she couldn't be of help to anyone. And she still had two weeks to go. She didn't know how she'd survive it. Time moved at a slow crawl. She felt like a caged animal, a blob, a vegetable.

Mike had been great, though. He made it a bit more bearable. He took it upon himself to be her nurse and entertainer, feeding her snacks and massaging her back, bringing puzzles and funny papers and books from the secondhand bookstore downtown. She was grateful for him.

She rubbed her belly, absently, watching a bit of red stain the edge of the bandage.

The past two weeks had given her lots of time to think. And she did, about everything and nothing at all, but her mind returned to the void, again and again, chewing over the details of the dream she'd had. It was unclear, now, what had really transpired in the moments before she'd woken to painful contractions. It was all fuzzy edges, now. She remembered the monster, the stench of its breath, smelling like death and dying things. She remembered how it turned and look straight at her, and there was no doubt in her mind that it had sensed her. Wherever it was, whatever it was, it had sensed her presence. And it had attacked. And the more she replayed it in her head, over and over again, the more certain she was that it had tried to hurt the baby. El recalled the sting of its claws sinking into her flesh, the pain

stretching from her hip to belly button. Maybe it was coincidence. Maybe it was the pain of the contractions transposed over the dream—like the thin, translucent paper that Will used for tracing. She'd never know, she just knew what she felt in that moment. If the dream wasn't real, the terror surely was.

For that reason, she had a hard time sleeping. She stole fragments of rest in the light of day, content to nap when she wasn't knitting or scrapbooking or watching soaps. When darkness arrived, however, and Mike dropped into a heavy slumber beside her, she would lay awake and stare at the wall, an unshakeable fear squeezing her lungs. She was afraid to fall asleep, afraid she'd somehow end up in the void and come face to face with that monster, again. Afraid if she did end up staring into that flower-petal maw of teeth (rows and rows of *teeth*) this time it might win. So, she spent her nights tossing and turning, and the lack of sleep only heightened her stress and frustration.

The gate was closed. It had been closed for six years. And for six years, she'd enjoyed a life free of monsters and bad men. Sure, there had been nightmares. Sure, she still had scars. But she'd begun to heal. They all had. And her heart sank through the floor at the thought of new monsters, new enemies, waiting in the dark. More shadows, more bloodshed. She couldn't help thinking the Upside Down wouldn't ever really let her go. That all the bad stuff—Brenner, the void, the monsters inside her head—would continue to haunt her. That she would never really be free of it, that she was putting her loved ones in danger, somehow, by mere association. That she was kidding herself by ever thinking she could lead a normal life. How cruel, to finally enjoy something resembling normalcy—friends, a family, freedom—only to have it stolen from her. And to be bringing a child into the middle of it . . . it was almost too much to bear.

She tried not to dwell on it, Mike's voice echoing in her head. *The stress is bad for the baby . . .*

Her mind ran away from her, sometimes, and she knew she was overthinking things. That it was a dream, nothing more, and that she was being completely irrational by jumping to such conclusions. Still, she couldn't erase the memory of that low, guttural growl emanating from deep within the monster's throat. The cold fear settling in her

gut like lead as it turned its head toward her, maw opening as it scented the air, a mere three feet away.

Monsters aside, she couldn't stop thinking about the likelihood that her daughter would be born with abilities. Powers, just like hers.

Over the years, she'd pieced together a more complete history of her past. With the help of Hopper and Sam Owens and the files and tapes they'd recovered from Hawkins Lab, she'd learned the truth of her identity. She was the daughter of Terry Ives, a young woman who'd participated in a series of experiments in a program known as MKUltra. The experiments were designed to study the effects of LSD and other psychoactive drugs, though the CIA had other, bigger plans. They were trying to see if it was possible for humans to acquire psionic abilities—telepathy, mind control, telekinesis—so they could gather intel to fight the Russians. And it worked. Terry Ives gave birth to a baby girl. A baby girl with psionic abilities.

Experiment 011 was their brainchild. A lab rat. Less than human.

They fried Terry's brains, leaving her a former shell of herself. But some piece of her remained, buried deep. And she'd used it to communicate with her daughter.

El knew her mother had retained some abilities. She could communicate with her through the void, for starters. She bled from her nose and made lights flicker. Were these abilities something that could be passed down from parent to child?

El had some sense of her daughter's emotions, her thoughts, in the womb. She could sense the baby's stream of consciousness, faint but present. Was that merely El's own abilities at work, or was it a joint effort? Did it mean her baby was projecting, already? Was it an early sign of powers that would manifest later?

God, she hoped not.

El didn't remember when her powers first started to appear. It was probably early in her childhood. Her abilities were part of her, as much a part of her as her own hand. A muscle, to be flexed and manipulated with a single thought. Sometimes it wasn't even a

conscious choice, but an instinctual reaction, like flinching.

Large chunks of her time in the lab were still missing from her memory. But the more distance she put between herself and that part of her life, the more she remembered. And the more it hurt to think of that scared, broken child she used to be.

If her daughter did have abilities, what would that mean for them? Her daughter would never lead a normal life. She'd live out her days with a curse. She'd have to learn how to control them, how to hide them, and El knew from experience how exhausting it was to try to control something she hardly understood. To constantly hide a piece of herself.

If her daughter is born with abilities, would the bad men find out? Would they steal her away, like they stole El from her mother?

"No." El said, aloud, to the empty room. She wouldn't let that happen. She *couldn't* let that happen. They were meant to be together. She knew it from the very beginning, from the day that little plastic stick revealed two pink lines. She belonged with the child she carried inside her. She was going to be a mother, and heaven and hell and everything in between couldn't keep her from protecting her little girl. The quiet moments, the beautiful ones, she'd experienced throughout this adventure had only reinforced this belief. El thought of all the times she'd felt her baby move, the times she'd heard the strong, rhythmic heartbeat or seen an ultrasound. The times she'd lain in Mike's arms and he'd kissed her bump, lips brushing her skin as he talked to her baby. Not her baby, *their* baby. This tiny thing that was both a part of her and a part of him. They were a family. And she'd fight to protect her family until her dying breath. And though she felt all of this, she still couldn't keep those little shadows of doubt from tainting her thoughts. Was it selfish, to try to raise this child when she was so unprepared to be a mother? When the world was so dark and ugly and broken? When El, herself, seemed to attract danger like light attracts insects? Was she making the right choice, when it was laid bare before her in the sober light of day? All she could offer her child was all the love in the world. Wasn't that enough?

El pushed all those bad thoughts away as best she could, telling

herself it was no use worrying about it, now. They'd roll with the punches. If monsters came knocking, if bad men showed up on her doorstep, if the gate opened, she'd deal with it. She'd fight. And if her daughter was born with abilities, well, maybe Mike was right. Maybe the things that hurt her most could also be beautiful.

El rolled onto her side, watching the numbers on the clock change. It was nearly six o'clock. Mike would be home, soon. Her stomach rumbled, and she thought about calling him to pick up take-out on his way home from class and decided against it, opting to get out of bed and take a trip to the kitchen. Her doctor said she could move around the house for short periods of time, if she needed to. To shower and use the bathroom and eat. But she wasn't allowed to take part in any strenuous activity, and she wasn't allowed to go up or down stairs, and she couldn't lift anything more than five pounds, which kept her options quite limited. El popped a T.V. dinner in the microwave and took it into her room, eating it in bed. She heard the jingle of keys outside and the door open, and Mike entered. He appeared in the doorway.

"Hey." She said, smiling. He threw himself on the bed, heaving a sigh.

"What's wrong?" She asked, running a hand through his curls.

"Mr. Peters' class literally make me want to die." Mike said, heaving another sigh. He laid his head in her lap. "He talks in this monotonous drone that makes you think maybe jumping out a tenth-story window is preferable to enduring another corporate communications lecture." He rolled his eyes. "I fell asleep."

"Sucks." She said. "Wanna trade places?"

Mike laughed. "You wouldn't last an hour in that class."

"Oh, yeah?" She said, cocking an eyebrow. "Try me."

Mike sat up, holding up his hands, palms out, in mock-surrender.

"Okay, fine. If you wanna go listen to that crusty old fart talk about marketing and human resources, I'll learn to knit.

"Deal." She said, sticking out her hand. He took it, and they shook.

She chuckled.

"You hungry? I'll make you something to eat."

"I'll do it." He said, jumping to his feet. "Just relax, El. Don't push it."

"I'm not. I've been in bed all day, I can walk to the kitchen." She said, getting up. They went into the kitchen, and she sat at their makeshift dining table while he made himself a PB&J sandwich, listening to him mock Mr. Peters' toneless drawl.

They watched *Caddyshack*. As the credits scrolled, El excused herself to the bathroom and got in the shower, letting the hot water soothe her. She heard the door open, and then Mike stepped under the water, smiling a goofy smile. The water plastered his hair to his face and she reached up to brush it out of his eyes, standing on tiptoes to kiss him. His hands cradled her belly. She leaned her forehead against his own, and they just stood there, letting the water cascade over them, enjoying each other. After, they toweled off and dressed in their pajamas, and then Mike sat on the edge of the bed and brushed El's wet hair. He braided it, a talent he'd perfected so he could help Holly with her hair-dos. He pressed a kiss to her forehead, killed the lights, and climbed into bed.

On Valentine's Day, Mike and El spent the evening in their pajamas, eating Ramen in bed and watching *Family Feud*.

Mike had a shift that day, but he promised he'd make it home by five to celebrate, even though El kept reminding him it was "stupid" and a "hallmark holiday" and "I don't need you to tell me you love me just 'cause it's Valentine's Day, Mike, you remind me every day." But he was determined to do something special.

It was raining. The January snow had melted to February slush, and the weather had been wet and miserable all week. The weather dampened spirits and contributed to an overall feeling of unpleasantness. He could see it in the faces of the customers that came into the Radioshack where he worked, shivering and shaking out rain-soaked umbrellas. He could see it in El's frown, in the way her eyes looked a little darker, a little more distant, as she watched

the storm clouds gathering outside the window in their bedroom, where she spent 99.9% of her day, bored out of her mind.

So, yes, he wanted to do something special. Hallmark holiday or not, he wanted to make her smile.

Mike took his lunch and hurried down the street to the coffee shop on the corner to get himself a pastry of some sort, pulling his hood up over his head as he did so. He watched the cars driving down the road, tires and windshields slick with rain water. As he walked, he tried to think of a surprise for El, in desperate need of an idea. Chocolates and flowers were cliché. He couldn't take her to dinner, given her current condition. He would cook her dinner, except he couldn't cook for shit.

Mike walked past the pet shop, stopping to look at a pair of fluffy, orange kittens in the window. The smaller one put its paw up against the glass, regarding him with large, yellow eyes. He smiled at it, getting an idea.

He chewed over it throughout the rest of the day, waiting until the sweet release as five o'clock rolled around to act on it. He drove through the rain and wind to the animal shelter across town. He told the woman at the front desk that he'd like to adopt a cat. She smiled, showing him to the back. She led him into a room full of crates, each one containing a different cat. He perused the aisle, peering between the bars. The cat in the crate at the end of the row caught his eyes. She had short, black fur. Mike noticed her left, front leg ended in a little stump just past her shoulder. Her remaining front paw was white.

"Hey, kitty." He murmured, putting his finger between the bars. She sniffed it, cautiously. He looked at the woman.

"What's her story?" He asked.

"She's a tripod. She was hit by a car and her front leg shattered. It had to be amputated. The previous owner couldn't pay for the surgery, so they surrendered her. She's been here about three weeks.

"She's a survivor." He remarked, with a smile. The woman opened the

crate and lifted the cat.

"She's shy. With a little patience and a little love, I'm sure she'll warm up you. It'll take time." She said. Mike took the cat from her, gathering the pitiful thing in his arms. He stroked the cat's head head, whispering nonsense in an attempt to soothe her. He looked at the woman.

"I'll take her."

Mike paid the modest adoption fee, filled out some papers, and carried the newest addition to the family out to the car. He set the crate on the front seat. During the drive home, he hashed out the ground rules with the cat, who he'd named Yardstick. She meowed, mournfully, from inside the crate.

As he pulled into a parking space at their apartment building, it occurred to him that he didn't know if pets were allowed in the building. To prevent a premature end to his and Yardstick's acquaintance in the unfortunate event they bumped into the landlord, he took her out of the crate and hid her in the folds of his coat, opting to take the back stairwell up to their apartment.

"El?" He called, upon entering.

"Hi." She answered. He went to her room, finding her in bed, sitting up with a book balanced on her pregnant belly, reading.

"Hey." He said, softly, crossing the room and leaning in for a kiss. She stopped him with a hand on his chest.

"*What* is that?" She asked, pointing to the moving lump inside his jacket.

"A gift for you, milady." Mike answered, unzipping his jacket to reveal Yardstick in all her three-legged glory. "Happy Valentine's Day." He set her on the bed. She meowed, resentfully. El's mouth fell open.

"It's a cat." She said.

"Obviously."

Mike sat down on the edge of the bed, reaching out the scratch her behind the ears. El smiled, letting Yardstick sniff her hand.

"You bought me a cat?"

"Yeah. I thought you might like the company."

"Mike, we've got a baby on the way."

"I'm aware . . ." He said, slowly.

"Having a cat is gonna be another responsibility. It's like having another kid."

"We can handle it." He said. "I mean, how hard can it be? What do cats do? Eat and sleep?"

"And shit." El added, with a shrug. She shot him a sideways glance, stroking Yardstick's fur. She began to purr, and El smiled. "You're sure about this?"

"Positive."

"She's cute." El said, thoughtfully. "What should we name her?"

"I call her Yardstick."

"What?"

Mike shrugged. "She's got three feet."

"That's awful!"

"It's funny." Mike said, chuckling. "We'll call her 'yard' for short."

"She needs a proper name." El said, with a frown. She looked at the cat, thoughtfully.

"I'm gonna call her Matilda."

"Oh, that's better than Yardstick?"

"Yes." El said, defiantly. "Everything's better than Yardstick! That's a

stupid name for a cat."

"It fits!" Mike countered.

El got out of bed, scooping the cat in her arms.

"C'mon, Matilda." She crooned, making her way to the kitchen.

"Yardstick!" He called after her.

"Don't listen to him, he's an idiot."

Mike followed her into the kitchen, watching her fill a bowl with water and set it on the kitchen floor. Yardstick began to drink.

Mike warmed up two dishes of ramen in the microwave, and they ate it in bed. El polished off her meal and set it aside, snuggling against him. Yardstick appeared in the doorway, hesitated a moment, then jumped on the bed and settled herself between them.

In the end, it was lasagna that pushed her past the breaking point. She'd decided to cook dinner. She thought if she could just do one thing for herself, she'd feel better. Plus, she'd surprise Mike. She called Mrs. Wheeler to ask for the recipe for her lasagna, his favorite. She scrounged up the ingredients from the depths of their cabinets and set to work. And she burned it.

El stared at the dish, burnt beyond salvation, feeling tears begin to prick at her eyes. It was like someone had flicked a switch, inside her. And the tears became sobs that shook her whole body, blurring her vision and obliterating her senses. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't think. And somehow, she wound up on her hands and knees on the kitchen floor, sobs wracking her body. And that stupid cat paced the across the tiles, lingering just out of reach, yowling.

Mike found her like that, face puffy and red with tears, and the smell of burnt lasagna heavy in the air. Wordlessly, he'd gone to her, settling on the floor and pulling her into his arms. He rocked her back and forth, running his fingers through her hair, whispering words of comfort through his own tears, until the sobs subsided and all the tensed muscles in her body began to relax. He'd scooped her

up and carried her to bed, and they fell asleep in their day clothes, holding one another.

She was lying in bed, reading a book, when a dull *thud* reverberated through the apartment from the next room.

"You okay?" She called.

"Yeah!" Was Mike's hurried reply, and El rolled her eyes. He'd spent the entire weekend working on something. When El asked him what the hell he was doing, he wouldn't tell her.

"It's a surprise!" He'd say, grinning a stupid grin. When she to take a trip down the hall to find out for herself, he'd shooed her back into her room and told her to be patient.

That night, he'd appeared in the doorway with mysterious smudges of purple paint on his arms and his shirt.

"I've got something to show you." He said. She could hear the excitement in his voice. "I think we can risk a trip down the hall." He took her hand.

"Oh, so you've finally decided to reveal the big secret?" She said, rolling her eyes.

The corner of Mike's mouth tilted upward. "Close your eyes."

She did, covering her face with her other hand. He helped her down the hall, steering her into the baby's bedroom.

"Can I look?" She asked, with a laugh.

"Yes." He said, prying her hand away from her face.

The baby's room was no longer the stark, empty space it was when they'd moved in. He'd painted the walls lavender. The changing table they'd picked out was assembled and standing against the opposite wall. A comfy, plush chair sat in the corner. He'd invested in a bookshelf and arranged the stuffed animals atop it. A mobile with a sun and planets hung from the ceiling, spinning in slow circles. He'd

arranged some picture frames, one of him and El, one of Hop, one of the guys (and Max) on a shelf.

"Mike . . ." She began, eyes filling with tears.

"I know we don't have a crib, yet." He said, hastily. "We'll put it over there, under the mobile." He said, pointing to the far wall. "I just . . . I wanted to wait 'till I got my next paycheck for that. I'm also gonna sell some of my first semester textbooks, for some extra cash, and—"

"Mike." She said, cutting him off. "It's perfect.

She cupped his cheek, tears running down her face, marveling at the phenomenon that was Mike Wheeler. Mike Wheeler, who knew just how to cheer her up when she felt like everything was coming apart at the seams. Who knew exactly what she needed.

"It's perfect." She said, kissing him. "I love it. She's gonna love it."

Mike smiled.

"Yeah?"

She nodded.

"Yeah."

13. Chapter 13

February became March, winter became spring, and the last fractals of frost melted into beads of dew that clung to the blades of grass on the lawn surrounding their apartment. El was released from bedrest, *finally*. A nurse had stopped by the apartment to check on her, announcing she was finally allowed some reprieve.

"Take it slow." She'd warned. "Don't go run a marathon, or anything. Take a walk in the park, go shopping, get some fresh air, but nothing drastic."

That's exactly what El did. She went to the mall and perused the shops, ignoring the sideways glances and disapproving remarks and pitying looks she'd grown used to, by now. It felt good to be out and about. She bought a blouse she wouldn't even be able to fit into for another few months, but it was too cute to pass up. She went to the discounted shoe store in the mall and bought a pair of sneakers. The sales clerk at the shoe store smiled at her.

"Is this your first baby?" She asked.

El nodded.

"That's so exciting! My first is two, now. He's a little terror." She said, with a chuckle.

El smiled. The woman handed her a receipt and wished her luck.

El grinned.

"Thanks, you too."

El got a celebratory frozen yogurt and ate at a table in the center of the food court, people-watching and reveling in the freedom. Off of bedrest, she felt like her old self again. Well, almost her old self, if she could get around the fact that she was almost seven months pregnant. She'd begun to get uncomfortable. She'd hit the third trimester, which meant their grapefruit was more like a head of cauliflower, according to her book, and weighing in at a whopping

two pounds.

A lot of the aches and pains and worries that she'd battled during the first trimester and went away during the second had returned in full force. Her back was killing her. She grew fatigued after only a couple hours of activity and slept often. The baby's kicks and movements continued, too, keeping El up hours into the night as she tumbled around. And El had to pee *all* the time.

On top of that, she was just plain uncomfortable. She'd upped an entire cup size, her feet swelled, and her belly was so big she could no longer see her toes. As the baby doubled its size, so did El (or so it seemed), and El wondered if the old wives' tale had any merit. Apparently, when you had a girl you tended to gain weight all over, and El was gaining weight *all* over. She'd put on almost twenty pounds since the beginning of her pregnancy. Standing in the mirror in only her underwear, she studied her face—which was fuller and puffier than it had ever been, pre-pregnancy. She examined the curve of her belly, the angry stretchmarks crawling over her skin and the dark line stretching across her navel. As uncomfortable as she was, she loved each one of these changes. She'd watched her body grow to accommodate their little girl over these last several months, and it never ceased to amaze her.

As she entered the third trimester, El experienced a case of pregnancy brain. Though Simmons had mentioned symptoms of absent-mindedness due to crazy hormone levels, nothing could've prepared El for the bouts of thick fog that clouded her thoughts, making her forgetful and scatter-brained. It was as frustrating as it was unsettling. She often forgot her keys or neglected to buy the usual staples—bread and eggs and milk—at the store. Mike often teased her about it, going as far as to give her a multitude of new nicknames, of which "Space Cadet" and "Clouds" seemed to be his favorites.

Simmons had transferred her to a new doctor in Indianapolis. He was a middle-aged, balding man who introduced himself as Dr. Jeremy Muller. She'd met him once, when they'd first moved in and she'd gone in for another routine checkup. She liked him. He had a good sense of humor, and kind eyes. He'd called her after news reached him about her labor scare. By then, she'd already returned home from the hospital. He'd filled her in on the benefits of bedrest and what she

should be doing to stay healthy and relaxed and, if nothing else, pregnant, because their little girl wasn't ready to face the perils of the world outside the womb quite yet. He relayed all her nutritional and exercise needs over the phone and did his best to ease her concerns. She'd been more than grateful.

She made appointments for routine checkups with him every two weeks instead of four, per the usual protocol for expectant mothers in their third trimester and especially critical for El, whose labor scare had all of them on edge. She was no longer confined to bedrest, but she still moved carefully, still rested often, and still spent every moment terrified of the slightest sign of disturbance. She counted kicks religiously, and every twinge or funny feeling or something that smelled suspiciously like a contraction sent her spiraling into a panic. Days passed, then weeks, with a fair share of bumps in the road but no emergency trips to the hospital, thank God. By the time they made it into mid-March, and they crept closer to the capital-B, capital-D Big Day, El began to breathe easier.

Mike was ecstatic. She could see it in his eyes, hear it in voice, knew he could barely contain himself at the prospect of bringing their little girl home. El shared his excitement, of course, but she was also terrified more than anything else. She still felt way out of her element. She'd checked out books on postnatal development from the library. She returned to the apartment with her arms laden with a pile (the Indianapolis Public Library failing to share the Hawkins Library's five-at-a-time limit; needless to say, she took advantage) and retreated to the living room couch to read, stretched out in her best attempt to find a somewhat comfortable position, although in her planetary state she didn't quite recall the proper definition of *comfortable*. She'd make do.

She read about nursing, about sleeping patterns and health concerns, the whole works. While the books informed her, they also made her feel more and more out of control, utterly and completely overwhelmed, until the words blurred on the page and her stomach sank to her knees as the world slipped out of her fingers and spun out of orbit.

When she expressed her fears to Mike, he'd kissed her and assured her she had nothing to worry about. That she wasn't alone in this and

she was more than prepared, even if she didn't know it, and all that crap he said to make her feel better. The worst part was, he believed all of it. She wasn't blessed with the same confidence. While he floated through his days on cloud nine, she drowned in anxiety. The kind that started as a knot in her chest and spread until she had trouble eating and sleeping, and the nights wore on, filled with dreams, each one stranger and more troubling than the last. If she was lucky enough to get a wink of sleep, she still woke several times a night to pee or roll onto her other side. She was huge, and her enormous, pregnant belly didn't allow for the comfiest sleeping positions in the world.

As her due date grew nearer, her nesting instinct kicked into overdrive. She obsessed over anything and everything that had to do with their little grapefruit's impending arrival. She insisted on packing her hospital bag way in advance, organized the baby's clothes by function and color, and made Mike take practice runs to the hospital and back, timing the drive at different times of day and mapping at least two alternate routes (just in case). As she progressed further and further into the third trimester, her hormones went haywire. Her emotions walked the line between irritability and hysteria. She broke down into tears at the slightest provocation, and her moods flickered between highs and lows like a light switch turned on and off—instantly and without warning. In the brief periods of time she wasn't fast asleep on the couch or worrying about what kind of car seat they could afford, she was just downright irritable. More than once, she'd snapped at Mike or made some snide comment and immediately regretted it. She felt like she was losing grasp on her emotions, like the baby had become some awful parasite, sucking all the life out of her and turning her into this grumpy monster that no one wanted to be around. Hell, she didn't even want to be around *herself*.

When she put herself in Mike's shoes, she had no idea how he'd managed to hold it together for this long. Her patience would've long run out, by now, but he remained as steadfast and helpful as ever, eager to cater to her every need. He was her voice of reason whenever her thoughts and anxieties spiraled out of control. He never lost his temper when she was being particularly ornery, and he took on all the extra chores that so easily exhausted her. His devotion

was unflagging, and it didn't go unnoticed. She thanked whatever higher power that had led them to cross paths on that rainy, November night. When everything else seemed uncertain, when she felt like she was running in place, when she couldn't keep her head above water, he was there for her. He was this constant gravitational pull that kept her from spinning out of orbit, and she loved him more than she could articulate in words.

As they reached the end of March, school let out for spring break, which meant El had Mike all to herself for ten whole days. They spent the weekend shopping for last-minute supplies: diapers and bottles and a breast-pump and all the other things they still needed. She was due on May seventh, and the date loomed on the horizon, closer with each passing day. She wanted to prepare as much as possible.

They spent a couple days in Hawkins, departing on a warm, sunlit Monday morning. Mike opened the door for her, weekend bag slung over his shoulder, and she heaved herself into the passenger seat, wrestling to get the seatbelt around her huge, pregnant belly. During the drive, El rolled down the windows and let the breeze ruffle her hair, closing her eyes and inhaling the first breath of spring. She loved this time of year, filled with birdsong, when wildflowers dotted the fields between fences and farms and clouds drifted like mashed-potato kingdoms in the sky. A song by Queen came on the radio, and Mike cranked it up, the corner of his mouth lifting. El caught his smile.

"She's a Killer Queen!" El sang along with Freddie Mercury, tapping the beat with her fingernails against the leather arm of her seat.

"Gunpowder, gelatin,"

"Dynamite with a laser beam, guaranteed to blow your mind . . ."

They arrived in Hawkins mid-afternoon. Mike pulled up in front of her house, and she got out of the car and marched up the walk, leaving Mike to shuffle behind her, a bag slung over each shoulder.

She found Hop in the kitchen, nursing a cup of coffee. She drummed her knuckle on the doorframe. Hop turned, face breaking into a wide

grin when he saw her. She rushed (waddled) over to hug him. He planted a kiss on her forehead, then stooped to rub her belly, affectionately.

"You sure you aren't having twins?" He said, with a grin. Mike walked in, letting out a quip of nervous laughter.

"Careful, Hopper. She'll bite your head off."

El rolled her eyes.

"Are you sure you're keeping up with your diet?" She fired back, poking his belly. "I thought you were laying *off* the donuts."

Hop burst out laughing, encircling her in his arms for another, tight hug. El smiled, feeling his body quiver against her cheek as laughter rumbled in his chest.

"I guess I deserved that one." He said, ruffling her curls. She nodded, squirming out of his grasp.

"What're you kids up to?" He asked, leaning against the counter and raising his mug to his lips.

"Nothing much." El said, studying the chipping nail polish on one of her fingernails. "We went shopping for a few last-minute things. Mike's got the baby's room all ready to go . . ." El sighed, cradling her belly with two hands. "Now it's just a waiting game, I guess." She said, fondly.

"How many weeks?"

"Thirty-three." She said, heaving a sigh. "Seven to go."

Hop blew out a breath, shaking his head.

"Holy shit." He said. "I can't believe it."

"Believe it." El said, puffing out her cheeks. As uncomfortable as she was, as scary as it had been, she did enjoy being pregnant. She enjoyed sharing the journey with her little bean, enjoyed feeling every kick and movement. As she grew nearer to her due date, as

much as she was terrified that she would mess up, that something would happen, she also became complacent in her new motherhood. The nasty looks and rude comments people (complete strangers!) threw her way, that she was *too young to be having a baby*, and *didn't her parents ever teach her about sex*, barely fazed her anymore. When she walked down the street, even though she knew when people looked at her all they could see was her puffy cheeks and her planet-sized baby bump (and don't even get her started on the stretchmarks), she felt beautiful. She was proud. Proud of how strong she was, how much she'd withstood, already, how much she'd learned and grown in the aftermath of each bump in this long and uncertain road. They'd gotten through it together, her and Mike and their baby. Her journey wasn't over. Not by a long shot. But she knew she had the resilience to deal with anything anyone could throw at her. Maybe it was the hormones. She couldn't help feeling there was a bit of grace in what she was doing. She didn't choose this, but after everything, she didn't regret a thing. She was a mother. Fuck anyone who made any kind of judgement on the matter.

"It just went by so fast." Hop said, shaking his head.

"I know." She said, looking at him. "It's crazy, isn't it?"

Hop nodded, sipping contemplatively from his mug.

"How's everyone at the station?"

"Everyone's fine. Cal's daughter is getting married next month. We're invited to the wedding."

"Oh!" El said, smiling. "That sounds fun."

"Powell says he misses playing poker with you. Says nobody else can bluff as good as you can, and he likes a challenge." Hop scratched his nose, absently. "Flo saves all her crosswords for you. You should pay a visit while you're here, everyone'll be happy to see you."

"Definitely." El agreed.

"And you should call Joyce, too. She'll be excited to hear from you."

"I will."

She excused herself to use the facilities, listening to Mike and Hopper's muffled conversation as she relieved herself of the late-afternoon, car-ride, pregnant pee. After, she went up to her room and dialed Melvald's General Store. A woman whose voice she did not recognize picked up on the second ring.

"Melvald's." She quipped. El heard the snap of gum between her teeth.

"I'm looking for Joyce Byers. Is she working today?"

"She just went on her lunch break. She'll be back in a half-hour. Can I take a message?"

"Just let her know I called." El said, and hung up, sitting back on the bed to peer around her old bedroom, with its old Fleetwood Mac and The Runaways posters still taped to the walls and her Darth Vader and Obi Wan Kenobi action figures arranged on the dusty surface of her dresser.

She drummed a beat on the slope of her belly, feeling the responding poke of an elbow as her little girl shifted around.

"You remember our old bedroom, right?" She murmured. "Lots of history, here." She thought of the countless sleepovers. The half-eaten pizzas and crushed Dr. Pepper cans and prank calls. Max's skateboard propped against the wall and a bottle of electric blue nail-polish open between them as they gave each other manicures and complained about Mr. Grabowski, their overweight, pit-stained, tenth grade P.E. teacher. The scent of laundry detergent and autumn and maple syrup clinging to her nostrils as she lay on top of Mike, brushing his rain-dampened hair from his forehead and making constellations out of the freckles on his cheeks as she connected them with invisible lines drawn from her fingertip—they would stay like that for hours, just observing each other, each shift and glance and flutter of an eyelash a conversation in itself, sharing the same space and the same air. Their lips would meet and they'd kiss, slowly at first, exploring each other, and their hands would roam and they'd move in gentle, careful imitation of something they wouldn't dare engage in with Hop watching T.V. downstairs. Not until he went to bed and they were safe under the cover of darkness and his snoring. She thought of the

nights when they sat on the sill with their legs slung out the open window, smoke curling gracefully from the tip of a cigarette that they passed back and forth between them, a song by some indie band they both loved thumping away on the stereo. El mourned, not for the first time, the loss of those nights that had so suddenly passed her by. The nights they could be children. Here, sitting in her childhood bedroom, she could almost reach out and touch the ghost of those nights.

On cue, Mike appeared in the doorway. He dropped their bags by the door and crossed the room, taking a seat on the bed, beside her. The thin, worn mattress creaked and gave under his weight, and he sank a few inches lower. He took her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze that asked a question—simple and plain as if he's spoken it aloud. *You okay?* Her returning squeeze gave him an answer. *Yeah.*

"Just a little nostalgic, that's all." She said, leaning her head on his shoulder. His arm looped around her, holding her close. He massaged her shoulder, cheek resting against her temple.

"Did you talk to Joyce?"

"No. I called Melvald's, but I couldn't get ahold of her. I think I'll just drive down and see her in person."

"Okay."

"Wanna come?"

Mike shook his head. "I think I'll stay. Apparently, the Blazer's engine is acting up. Chief wants me to help him fix it."

El sighed. She wanted to suggest he visit his parents, but thought better of it. They were skating on thin ice as far as Karen and Ted Wheeler were concerned. And though Mrs. Wheeler made an effort to extend an olive branch, Ted Wheeler still refused to talk to Mike or even look him in the eye. And though Mike tried to hide it, El knew his rocky relationship with his parents, his father, especially, was still a source of continuous anguish for him. Mike pretended he didn't care. That whether his parents approved of his decisions or not was beneath him. But El knew him well enough to know it was eating

him up inside, and it was all her fault, and every time she thought about it she felt nauseous, like someone had taken her stomach and intestines and all her other internal organs and thrown them in a blender. So, she pushed the thought away, deciding she'd bring it up another time. Maybe she'd call Mrs. Wheeler and arrange a lunch date or something. It was her turn to extend an olive branch.

"That thing's a piece of junk. The A/C doesn't work and the radio cuts out and the passenger window won't roll down." She rolled her eyes. She drove the Blazer when she was first learning to drive, before she saved up enough to buy a car of her own (a little, red, four-seater thing from the late seventies that she simply adored). "He needs to get rid of it. But it's his baby, so of course he *won't*."

"It's only, what, nine years old? Ten?"

"It's a lemon." El said, with a sigh. She struggled to her feet. "Can I drive the Station Wagon?" Mike had inherited Mrs. Wheeler's Station Wagon, affectionately called the Draggin' Wagon or Dragon Wagon, depending on personal preference (Dustin called her Betsy). He had been the first to get his driver's license and inevitably become the chauffeur to all the party's shenanigans and road trips and midnight rendezvous. The car was a key feature in some of El's greatest memories. *God, the nostalgia*. She thought about Mike's hand-me-down Station Wagon and all the times they'd driven through town with the windows rolled down and speakers blown, all the soggy french fries under the seats, evidence of their 3 a.m. trips to McDonald's they called "adventures," and all the times they'd driven to some secluded place, the junkyard or the woods or the quarry, and they'd climb in the backseat and do what stupid teenagers do, and car would bounce with their movement. In her mind's eye, she saw a car seat fastened in the back seat and one of those yellow stickers that read *Baby On Board*, and for some reason that made her sad.

Mike tossed her the keys. She kissed him goodbye and descended the stairs. She fired up the Station Wagon, feeling the familiarity of it awaken beneath her fingertips, and pulled out of the driveway. She drove with the windows rolled down. She was glad to be back in Hawkins. This place was still home, and she knew every turn in the road, every pothole and building. She drove by muscle-memory, letting her mind run away from her.

She pulled up in front of Melvald's just as Joyce got out of her car, cigarette dangling from her lips. They reunited in the parking lot, and Joyce's face broke into a broad grin. El hugged her.

"Hey, sweetie. My god, look at you, you look so beautiful!" Joyce exclaimed, grasping her hands.

"Thank you! I missed you so much." El said, smiling.

"I heard about your trip to the hospital. That must've been scary."

El nodded.

"They had you on bedrest?"

"Yes. Four weeks of bed rest." El said, with a frown. "Worst four weeks of my life."

Joyce laughed. "I bet."

"They gave me the green light to get up and moving, again. I'm being careful, still, but everything's looking good."

"Good. I'm glad." Joyce said, ruffling her curls. She glanced at the storefront of Melvald's with its glowing *Open* sign and an assortment of stuffed animal bunnies and ducklings in observance of Easter Sunday, which was only a few weeks away.

"Let's see if they can't give me the rest of the day off, huh? I haven't seen you in forever! We need some girl time." Joyce gave her a wink, and El trailed behind her as she marched up the walk and pulled open the door, triggering the bell. They found Donald Melvald in the back, unboxing a shipment of Lysol cleaning products. After a quick conversation, he obligingly gave Joyce the rest of the day off—just enough time for them to get some ice cream and a mani-pedi if they had time to spare. Joyce was keen to spoil her, and god knew El needed something to take her mind off her worries.

As they left the ice cream parlor, waffle-cones in hand, El bumped into a girl she recognized from her high school class. She knew the tall, athletic, freckled girl as Avery Jenkins, her lab partner in Chemistry. They'd shared many whispered conversations in the back

of Mrs. Sanders' class. They'd helped each other with homework and rendezvoused in the library for some afterschool study time on more than one occasion.

"Avery?" El asked. A flicker of recognition crossed the girl's face. Her eyes drifted downward, taking in El's baby bump, and her eyes widened, a gasp of surprise dying in her throat.

"J-Jane! Oh my gosh, h-how're are you?" She stammered, pursing her lips. She studied the floor.

"I'm good." El said, with a smile. "How're you?"

"Oh, I'm . . . I'm good." She said. Her eyes finally lifted to meet El's gaze.

"You're pregnant?" She blurted, rudely. El's cheeks pinked.

"Um, yeah. I am." She said. This time, it was El's turn to cast her gaze aside, suddenly finding it hard to look the girl in the eyes.

"Oh my god." She said. "I wouldn't expect *you* of all people . . ." She trailed off, biting her lip.

El laughed, nervously. Her heart crawled into her throat. "Um . . . what?"

"I mean, it's just, you have to be really stupid to get pregnant, I mean, was it an accident? 'Cause if I was, well . . . I just, I thought you were smarter than that."

Blood rushed to El's cheeks, and tears itched the back of her eyes, stinging and hot. She blinked them back, feeling silly and stupid for taking the bait. In Hawkins, where everyone knew everyone and the town's population capped at ten-thousand, she was bound to run into someone she knew, and they were bound to judge her for the little life she carried inside. Their judgements were beneath her, or, at least, they should've been. She could no more control what people thought than she could control the moon's phases or the passage of time. Why did it bother her so much? The only thing she could think was that it hurt more coming from someone she might've considered a friend. She opened her mouth, a venomous retort dancing on her

tongue, but before she could say anything, Joyce rounded on the girl, shaking with fury. And though Joyce was five-three and barely tipped the scales at one-hundred pounds soaking wet, she was a force to be reckoned with.

"How *dare* you?" She screeched. "How *dare* you talk to her like that? Listen, you little bitch, you think you're better than everyone else? Why don't you pull that pointy nose out of your ass and stick it in someone else's business?"

Avery's ears reddened. Her face pinched.

"Go fuck yourselves." She spat, turning on her heel. She marched out the door and whipped around the corner and out of sight. El stared after her, tears stinging her eyes. Joyce's face softened, though rage still smoldered in her damp eyes, shining with unshed tears. She pulled El into a hug.

"Don't listen to her. If anybody talks to you like that, you shove your middle finger in their faces. It's not their business." El nodded, unable to speak around the massive lump obscuring her windpipe. She swallowed hard, watching a drop of melting strawberry ice cream trickle down the side of her waffle cone and drip onto her thumb. Joyce wrapped her arm around El's shoulders and guided her outside. Finally, El mustered up enough breath to whisper a soft *thank you* as they continued down the street.

"Don't thank me, sweetheart. It's my job." Joyce gave her shoulders another squeeze. "Moms protect daughters."

El lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling. After they'd finished their ice cream cones, they'd stopped to get their nails done, and then El had bid Joyce goodbye. Will was flying home from New York tomorrow, and El couldn't wait to see him.

"You and Mike and Hop are welcome to come over for dinner." Joyce said. "I'm planning on trying a new chicken casserole recipe."

El smiled. "Count us in."

Joyce had smiled, pressing a kiss to both El's cheeks.

El had driven home in silence, mood considerably dampened despite her excitement at the prospect of seeing Will again. Gloom and weariness hung over her—a thick fog she couldn't fight her way out of. Avery's look of shocked disgust, quickly papered over with a kind of false friendliness that smelled suspiciously like poisoned honey, kept surfacing in her mind. Avery had called her stupid, but El could only imagine the plethora of other words dancing on her tongue. Sharp, jagged words that hid behind her fake smile and pitying glance.

She *hated* it. Hated the way people looked at her, like she was less of a person, somehow, because she was pregnant. She'd been ostracized, pitied, and shamed. She was the girl that people stole glances at before casting their eyes aside. She was the girl that middle-aged women with faces pinched in disapproval whispered about, almost always loud enough for her to hear every single word they said. *It's a shame she's rushing into things*, and *she's too young*, and *there's no father in sight* and all the other little digs and casual remarks that made her feel like shit. She wanted to scream at them. But then she thought better of it. Why waste her breath? If anything, she pitied *them*. If they didn't have anything better to do than criticize her choice to have a baby, then they weren't worth a rat's ass, letting alone getting upset over.

El heaved a sigh, rolling onto her side. Her thoughts quieted and she dropped into a restless doze until Mike woke her with kisses lighter than moth's wings pressed to her eyelids, announcing dinner was ready.

She didn't tell Mike about Avery. In fact, she didn't speak about it again. She locked it in a dark closet within her mind and cast away the key.

The following day, she and Mike accompanied Joyce to pick up Will from the airport. He met them at the baggage claim and swept El into a tight hug, gushing over how good she looked, kneeling down to press a kiss above her belly button. El found herself struggling to reconcile the man standing before her with the Will Byers she used to know. She'd seen him at Thanksgiving and again at Christmas, but

never had he looked so comfortable in his own skin. His eyes were clear and bright, his smile was genuine, and it lit up his entire face. A kind of energetic, carefree confidence hung about him, such a drastic change from the weary, frightened boy she used to know that she almost didn't recognize him—a far reach from the Will Byers that came back from the dead.

They'd had their fair share of monsters and bad memories. Though El and Will hadn't met before their showdown with the Mind Flayer, it felt like she'd known him her whole life. They became fast friends. They both used words sparingly. They both had survived close encounters with the Demogorgon and the Upside Down. El, of all people, knew what it was like to live with voices in her head and an uncanny link to that shadow world filled with darkness and monsters. She knew what it was like to be different, to spend your whole life treading water, trying to keep your head above the surface. Maybe that was why they just seemed to *get* each other. That was why she always knew she could talk to Will when something was bothering her, why he came to her for comfort when the nightmares were particularly bad. Maybe that was why she, though she refused to pick a best friend, felt inextricably linked to him. El was the first person Will had opened up to when he admitted he liked boys the way he was supposed to like girls. God, he'd *cried*, and they'd held each other, and she'd assured him, over and over, that he shouldn't be ashamed to love who he loved. She was closer to him than any other member of the party, Mike aside. He was like a brother to her. Their friendship was just *different* from her friendships with Dustin and Lucas and even Max. For better or worse, she didn't know. She only knew that when she needed a shoulder to lean on, when she needed to work through things or talk about stuff of the Demogorgon variety or devote an entire afternoon to art therapy, she went to Will without a second's hesitation. So, when he pulled her into yet another bone-crushing hug, she thought her heart might burst for all the joy she felt seeing him again. Even if it had only been a couple months since they'd parted ways.

They spent the drive catching up. Will was excelling in his art classes, a favorite amongst his professors. He asked El and Mike about their new apartment and she filled him in on the details.

"How's the baby?"

"She's good. I have to pee all the time, and I get dizzy when I stand up too fast, and she keeps me up half the night with all the kicking, but she's healthy and that's all that matters." El said, glowing with pride.

Will dropped his bags off at the Byers' house, then went with them back to Hopper's place. Joyce had been called into work to cover the night shift, so dinner had to be postponed to the following night. Hop was scheduled for the nighttime patrol, as well, which meant the three of them had the house to themselves. Mike ordered a pizza, and they spent the night sprawled across the sofa in the living room, watching movies and trading bits of conversation and laughter.

Will asked if he could feel the baby kick and El happily obliged, easing her shirt up and guiding Will's hand so his palm rested against her skin.

"C'mon, little girl." El crooned, softly. "Are you awake in there?"

After a moment, the baby began to stir, prodding and poking. Will's eyes widened, delighted.

"Woah."

El laughed.

"She likes you."

The baby's movements were visible to the naked eye, El's belly taking on an odd, lopsided shape as a foot pressed up against the skin. She dropped her shirt, rubbing her belly to calm the baby.

The credits rolled at the end of *Ghostbusters*, and Mike got up to pop another tape (*Die Hard*) into the VHS player. He went to the kitchen and retrieved a couple cans of Schlitz from fridge. He cracked them, handing one to Will. El sipped from a can of 7-Up, rolling her eyes as they consumed a second round of beers, a third, a fourth, fifth, growing louder and gigglier by the hour. When they retired to bed, it was well past midnight and El was stifling yawns behind her hand. Will slept on the couch, and she and Mike retreated to her bedroom.

He eased on top of her, pressing sloppy, fumbling kisses to the corner of her mouth, her cheek, her brow, and down the column of her neck. She stopped him with a hand on his chest.

"You're drunk." She said.

"You're beautiful" was his reply. He grinned. She rolled her eyes, turning onto her side. He wrapped his arms around her, still planting quick, chaste pecks along her collar bone.

"I love you, El Hopper." He crooned, playfully, nuzzling her neck. She closed her eyes.

"I know."